櫻子さんの
足下には
死体が
埋まっている
蝶の足跡
太田紫織
角川文庫

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Prologue

I'm upset with Isozaki-sensei because he doesn't understand why I'm so distraught. Saying Sakurako-san and I bloom in different places. I've known that for a long time.

"She's not a child. She can have her own plans. Just wait until she comes back, and if she doesn't come back, she's free to do that, too," Isozaki-sensei says while drinking his gross chamomile tea on the sofa without changing his expression. His uninterested tone makes me feel even more irritated.

"That's true, but… I'm scared, it seems unusual."

How could she do that at a time like this? Phantom could be watching us. Besides-

"…It might be my fault if she doesn't come back."

That's my biggest fear. It's always, always weighing on my mind. In front of Asahikawa station, I blamed Sakurako-san. I was scared about how she only values human lives as numbers. Isozaki-sensei silently listens to my confession. Eventually, he lets out a long sigh.

"Honestly, I think you interfere too much, Shoutarou."

"Interfere?"

"Well, I guess I should have said you expect too much. Don't you think of Kujou-san as an angel or a goddess of some sort?"

"That's not true."

If she were an angel she would be one that marks death. If she were a goddess, she'd be one of the underworld.

"Then it's up to her to decide who she wants to kill or save. She's not a little kid."

"…So you'd be fine with it if Sakurako-san became a criminal?"

Isozaki-sensei shrugs. I think he's trying to say it doesn't matter to him.

"I'm always anxious about it. Sakurako-san is much more unstable than everyone thinks. Probably more than you even know."

Isozaki-sensei narrows his eyes at my words. The corners of his mouth gently curl into a smile, as if he's saying "you're the same." It's true that I still have a lot of years ahead of me, more than enough time to lose my way.

"But… She has gran and her uncle now. That's how she's managed so far. When they're gone, Sakurako-san will be vulnerable. I think she has special feelings for Shouko-san and Ariwara-san, but there's no way they can help her the way gran and Shitara-sensei can."

Yes, she's fine for now. She has two "guardians" who advise her, scold her, and shackle her to the "rules of society."

"Those two have been filling in the gap between Sakurako-san and the rest of society until now. That's how she's been able to make it through life so far, but… It would be dangerous if she were to stop feeling discomfort around death, or lose interest in the bereaved families."

I take a sip of my tea. It's bitter, but it's warm and smells nice… It reminds me of Sakurako-san.

If you were to explain simple rules to her, like 1+1=2, she can understand that. She can understand society's rules, as long as someone lays them out for her. Most people would then be able to infer that if 1+1=2, then 10+10=20, but unfortunately, she can't grasp that. She lives by an equation that only she knows the answer to.

"If she weighs lives by pure numbers, she's one step short of being like Phantom. It's dangerous for her to follow her own sense of values, rather than the rules and laws laid out by the rest of humanity. She is putting the lives of herself and others at risk."

She determines the value of other peoples' lives using her own personal values. Like Anubis under the guise of a beautiful woman who doesn't follow "good" and "evil."

"Sakurako-san might not fully realize this yet, but… Gran is getting old. Sooner or later, she'll pass away. It's the same for her

uncle… Very soon, she won't have anyone to guide her!"

I used to think my grandma would always be with me. I knew she would pass on eventually, but I thought she'd still be there as I grew up, got married, and had kids of my own. But that's not how life works. I didn't get enough time with her. I'm still not an adult yet, and I haven't accomplished anything. She died before I even got to think about how I'd live without her.

"…And I know I can't stay with Sakurako-san forever. Maybe another year would be fine, but I can't imagine another 5, or even 3 years."

My relationship with Sakurako-san has been ambiguous since the beginning, and there's no easy way to explain it. All I know for sure is that if the world around us changes, we won't be able to get along like we have until now.

"It would be nice if Ariwara-san could always be with her, but those two spend more time apart than together. What if he isn't there to stop her if something were to happen…? Phantom's shadow is looming over her, too…"

"Just like flowers each have a spot where they bloom best, butterflies also have unique conditions in order to thrive. Take the snow Apollos we have in Hokkaido, for example. As larvae, they only feed on corydalis ambigua and corydalis speciosa. They can't live anywhere without those flowers."

So basically, he's saying that she won't change, regardless of who is with her.

"Sensei, Sakurako-san isn't a flower or a butterfly. She's a human being. She can choose where she wants to live. She can at least take care of the bereaved families, and she's learning how to get better at it. I just want to keep her on track, so she doesn't lose her way."

I can at least do that much. It's something that only I can do.

"I have to do this for gran's sake, because I'm Soutarou-kun to her."

I have to be the reincarnation of her little brother. If fate really does exist, I'm sure I can do that for her. Soutarou-kun only died that day because he was worried about his sister. It's my responsibility to

protect Sakurako-san in his stead. I also want to do this for gran's sake. I'll enforce strict rules on her so that she doesn't become one of Phantom's butterflies. First thing's first, I have to find Sakurako-san, before Phantom catches her.

"…I never thought I'd see you crying in my house." Isozaki-sensei sighs.

"Wh…! I'm not crying! I'm just still wet from the rain!"

"Sure you are."

He turns on the TV. He turns to the weekly weather forecast.

"Chiyoda-san invited me before to go see the roses. She's definitely closer to Kujou-san than I am. Why don't you try talking to her?"

Fortunately, the weather should be nice on Sunday. Even Shouko-san didn't know anything, but I won't make any progress if I just sulk around. I don't know how, but I have to do something.

First Bone: A Butterfly's Footprints

On the first Sunday after the start of school, I visited Isozaki-sensei and Shouko-san's houses.

"In that case, let's have lunch together," Shouko-san said.

She arranged for us to have steak made of "Asahi Takasago beef" that just came out this year. It's produced by Takasago brewing company, a long established shop in Asahikawa. They feed the cows sake lees, and only package the meat for sale once it has fully matured. The meat is tender and moderately firm. In other words, it's meat you can keep eating without getting tired of it, and even the fat is easy to chew. The 250 grams that were prepared for me disappeared in the blink of an eye. In Asahikawa, people typically eat pork, chicken, and jingisukan, so cows are usually for dairy products rather than meat. I didn't think you could get such good beef here.

After eating, we gather around the table in the garden and get down to business. Thankfully, the Chiyoda family's flowers still seem healthy, even after the recent typhoon. Isozaki-sensei is in a good mood, since he's surrounded by flowers.

Isozaki-sensei asks for Shouko-san's permission, then starts tending to the garden. He's wearing a large brimmed hat that covers the back of his neck and his face to protect him from the sun. He also had sturdy gloves for handling the roses, and a straw coloured gardening apron. I'm having some tea along with a tart that's piled with plenty of strawberries and blueberries. The garden has a really nice atmosphere. Isozaki-sensei lends an ear to our conversation.

"Yeah, unfortunately I haven't been able to get in contact with them, either. I don't think Nao-chan has, either. I did hear they were on a trip, though," Shouko-san says, sounding troubled. I poke at the mint on top of my tart.

"Hasn't it been too long, though?"

"It's been less than a month, though. That's not too long, is it?"

"…"

The two of us look at each other. I'm absolutely bewildered by the difference in our perspectives. The longest I've ever traveled is 4 days and 3 nights, and that was for my school trip in middle school. On the other hand, Shouko-san is a high class lady who is now unmarried. I guess it wouldn't be too unusual for her to go on an extended trip.

"Well… I suppose it is a bit unusual for that girl to go on a vacation for this long. It's just a trip, though. I don't think there's anything to worry about."

"But she didn't even say where she was going, right?"

I feel uneasy whenever I think about that. If you're going on a trip for this long, wouldn't you normally tell people close to you about it? Maybe I could see her not mentioning it if she were traveling alone, but she has gran with her this time.

"Maybe they're just traveling without a fixed destination in mind?"

"That's possible, but… Doesn't it seem like it happened too fast?"

If they were planning a long-term trip, you'd think they would have told someone at some point.

"About a month ago I suggested that the two of us go on a trip. She declined, saying she didn't feel like traveling. She may not have

been gone as long as you think."

"I've finished taking care of the flowers," Isozaki-sensei says as he returns to us.

"Thank you, you were a big help."

For someone who always complains that he hates sweating, Isozaki-sensei sure doesn't seem to mind it when it comes to gardening. He takes off his hat and looks out at the garden while wiping the sweat off his forehead. Shouko-san looks really happy while staring at Isozaki-sensei.

"Oh yeah, what do you think?"

"Me?"

"Yeah, about Sakurako's sudden trip," Shouko-san asks while pouring Isozaki-sensei a cup of tea.

"I don't think anyone except Kujo-san herself is capable of understanding what she's thinking."

"…That's true." Shouko-san sighs while getting Isozaki-sensei a scone with plenty of red jam and clotted cream on it

It's a sunny afternoon at the end of summer. The sunlight is softly filtering through the trees. However the three of us are in a lull in our conversation, seemingly unable to find the words to say.

"…I thought you were too worked up over this, but I can't say I'm not worried either," Shouko-san eventually mutters while raising her cup to her lips.

"Really? Of course, I'd be glad if she were having a nice time right now. But… I just can't imagine Sakurako-san relaxing in a hot spring, or going sightseeing at tourist attractions."

A normal person would be willing to endure being a bit bored in order to spend time with someone important to them, such as a parent. However, even if Sakurako-san might be able to tolerate it for a day or two, she wouldn't last for several weeks.

"…Let's go," Shouko-san says abruptly after a moment of silence.

"What?"

"To the Kujou house, that is. Maybe they've left a clue behind?"

"But…"

How will we get in? Shouko-san grins at me.

“I have my own key to the house, so it’s not like we’ll be breaking in. If I disappeared, I’m sure she would do the same thing.”

I feel bad about entering her house without permission, but… It really does sound like something Sakurako-san would do.

“Itsuki-san, I’ll be counting on you to drive us.”

Shouko-san quickly finishes off her tea. Isozaki-sensei looks troubled. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him make that expression. I’m sure he regrets bringing me here today. It’s nice to have so many people I can rely on. When I first asked him to drive me, he didn’t say anything. After pleading about how much I needed to go, he eventually gave in, but he pulled hard on my cheeks first. I’m glad I grew up in a time without corporal punishment.

Part 2

We all pile into Isozaki-sensei’s Mini Cooper and head to Sakurako-san’s house. I gave up the front seat to Shouko-san, so my lower back is sore from sitting in the back seat. I won’t complain, though, since he was nice enough to drive us.

“Ah!”

Shouko-san screams as soon as she walks through the gate because of all the spider webs right at eye level. There’s countless huge orb weaver nests all around the entrance and the path leading to it. Isozaki-sensei and I brush the webs away to clear a path through the garden. It must have been a long time since anyone walked through here. At least we can be sure she hasn’t been home since she disappeared.

We open the front door and head inside. The air is cold, and it smells like an old building. The house looks and feels like an old museum.

“It’s cold, even at this time of year…” Shouko-san looks lonely.

White light is shining in through the windows, illuminating the dust floating in the air due to neglect. This house feels like a completely different place without those two around. Even the couch and cushion I usually sit on look alien to me. I’m uncomfortable with how it feels like I’m seeing it for the first time. It’s the same bone filled

living room as always, but it looks like Hell without Sakurako-san there.

"…Doesn't it look like someone has cleaned up?" Isozaki-sensei says as he looks around the room.

"What?"

"Look over here. There's a faded spot where there used to be a painting here."

"Oh, now that you mention it…" I look to where he's pointing, and sure enough, the wall is a slightly different colour there.

"Oh, that was a piece by Sawato Fukui-sensei, a painter who was born in Asahikawa," Shouko-san says as she gently touches the wall. "Don't worry about it. She just got rid of some artwork she doesn't need anymore."

"She got rid of it?"

"Yes, through an art dealer we're both acquainted with. Her grandfather used to collect artwork, so it was one of his pieces. It's a shame that she got rid of it, but I'm sure she has her reasons. I only step in if there's a piece she really shouldn't get rid of."

I can't help but feel like there's something strange about her getting rid of paintings. On the other hand, I can't see Sakurako-san feeling sentimental over a piece of artwork.

"But since she hasn't kept them in good condition, the value must have gone down considerably… Isn't it a waste?"

"And so suddenly…"

"Speaking of sudden, Sawa-san mentioned that they've been cleaning out the house for the past year. This could have been just one art piece among many that were disposed of, especially if they cleaned out the storage shed."

It's true that the storage shed was chaotic. I wouldn't have been surprised if there were ghosts in there. Unfortunately, there's no notes or anything left in the living room saying where they went. I wish they'd forgotten a guidebook or something, at least. Shouko-san is starting to lose interest, so we head up to the second floor. She doesn't hesitate to start opening one particular door.

"Shouko-san?"

"What?"

“Even considering the circumstances, that room is kind of…”

It’s Sakurako-san’s bedroom. Of course, I’ve never entered it. However, Shouko-san laughs at me.

“I don’t think she cares about people going into her room. Besides, there’s nothing in there she can’t show other people. Don’t worry about it.”

Even if she tells me that, I’m still going to worry about it. Isozaki-sensei goes in without any hesitation. He walks past the desk that Shouko-san is looking at, and heads for the window. He opens the window up a bit roughly. The fresh air rushes into the room, causing the white curtains to flutter.

“Oh… You can see that cherry blossom tree from here.” Shouko-san suddenly raises her voice, sounding surprised.

That cherry blossom tree - the one Sakurako-san was named after, and the one her mother hanged herself on. On one hand I’m surprised that Sakurako-san can live normally while seeing the tree her mother died on every day. On the other hand, it seems exactly like something she would do.

“That tree… It blooms incredibly beautifully every few years. Sakurako-san’s grandfather said it was a ‘bad omen’. Bad things happened during the years when it bloomed well. But apparently that girl was born during one of those years,” Shouko-san murmurs while leaning against the window sill.

That means good things happened in those years, too, right?

“Wasn’t it simply a cold spring?”

“Huh?”

“The year Kujou-san was born. It might have been a year where the temperature dropped temporarily before the blooming season,” Isozaki-sensei says. Shouko-san tilts her head to think.

“…Now that you mention it, I think so. It was cold over the consecutive holidays that year, so the cherry blossoms bloomed late.”

The fact that the cherry blossoms here blooming in mid May, when Sakurako-san was born, means it was definitely a late blooming period.

“If the temperature drops just before the flowers bloom, the anthocyanin in the buds won’t break down. That causes the colour of

the flowers to darken, making them seem more plentiful and beautiful."

The darker the colour of the flowers, the more striking they appear. Even if you know the colour of the flowers during a normal year, some years they seem even more splendid.

"The bad weather affects Hokkaido's economy, too. Even more so in the past. That's probably why it always seemed to be a 'bad year'. I wonder if it wasn't the tree being a 'bad omen' so much as the impact of the weather."

Isozaki-sensei managed to disprove the ominous premonition handed down through the Kujou family. Shouko-san is at a loss for words.

"I didn't expect you to say something so scientific and emotionless. I thought of you as a fluffier type of person."

"Putting the 'fluffy' thing aside for now, I just wanted to say something because I knew a reasonable explanation for it."

Trees and flowers to Isozaki-sensei are the same as bones to Sakurako-san.

"I'm glad you're on Saachan's side." Shouko-san glances at me like she's asking for my permission to speak. I can't tell from her expression whether she's going to say something good or bad.

"Even if it was just the weather, it's a fact that the cherry blossoms were especially beautiful when Nadeshiko-san and Kaoruko-san died… Have you heard the story of man-eating cherry blossoms?" Shouko-san says sadly as she walks towards the bookshelf.

She gently touches two books, one by Motojirou Kajii and one by Ango Sakaguchi. I'm surprised to see them among the collection of books about skeletons and anatomy. It doesn't seem like something she would be interested in.

"Motojirou Kajii wrote about the beauty of life and the allure of death. Ango Sakaguchi saw the beauty and horror in people who hang themselves from cherry blossom trees. I wonder how Sakurako sees it."

"I don't think Kujou-san sees it as anything other than an ordinary sargent cherry tree in the garden." Isozaki-sensei's argument

sounds likely, but he says it so coldly. Shouko-san looks displeased.

“In the end, we’re always the ones left scratching our heads, Shou-chan.”

I know exactly what she means. I force a smile.

“But, you know, that tree really is beautiful in full bloom, just like her. But we have to be careful… Truly beautiful cherry blossoms suck the life out of people to bloom.”

“If it’s a really beautiful flower, I think it might be okay to give it my life.”

Isozaki-sensei gives me a meaningful look.Like he wants to deny it, but can’t.

“See, this is why men are too romantic.” Shouko-san gets tired of us, and turns her attention back to the desk and bookshelf. A commercial sized box of nitrile gloves catches my eye.

“Would… it be okay for me to take one of these?”

I subconsciously start reaching for them before Shouko-san can even reply. “I don’t see why not,” she says.

I’m sure Sakurako-san would say it’s fine, too. I pick one up. I love the nostalgic scent of nitrile.

“She’s going to come back,”

I tell myself as I put the glove in my pocket. When she comes back, we can go looking for dead animals in the mountains again. I even bought a matching oil compass for that sole purpose.

“Here’s her passport. That means they didn’t go overseas,” Shouko-san says as she shuts the desk drawer. She opens the closet to confirm that the suitcase is gone, too.

“Then… Where did they go?”

Sakurako-san and gran’s destination. I can’t think of a place that they particularly liked.

“Even if we only think about Hokkaido, it’s too big of an area. We need to have some kind of goal in mind.”

“They might have gone to a hot spring, but it’s rare for a town in Hokkaido to not have at least one these days.”

“And even then, they might not have gone to one place. It’s nice to go around and visit a few of them, right?”

There's various different kinds of hot springs. I'm sure gran would be delighted to go around and visit different ones across Hokkaido.

"Since she has gran with her, that means it's some place gran would be happy to go to. In that case, doesn't it make a hot spring tour pretty likely?"

Isozaki-sensei doesn't deny our theory.

"In that case, what about Sounkyo?"

"It's nearby, and also…"

"Sounkyo…? Oh!" That's right, Kouji-san runs a hotel there.

"Let's try asking."

Kouji-san and Sakurako-san know each other. I'm sure he would prepare a nice room for her if she called him up.

At first, Kouji-san says he doesn't know anything, but he eventually says to Shouko-san, "I promised Sakurako that I would keep it a secret, but a few weeks ago I had a special request for someone to stay for two nights."

I'm positive that Kouji-san has feelings for Shouko-san. Honestly, it's Sakurako-san's fault for thinking he could keep a secret from Shouko-san. Maybe he was just stalling for time to stay on the phone with Shouko-san longer.

"I don't know if the two of them are still around, but how about we go check it out?" Shouko-san says while checking her wristwatch.

Isozaki-sensei looks gloomy. He definitely doesn't want to take us to Sounkyo, but we don't have any other choice.

"Ah!"

I head downstairs to have one more look around the living room. I notice something missing from the mantle above the fireplace.

"What's wrong?"

"The picture is gone. There used to be an old family photo here."

It was always lying face down. Shouko-san seems to remember it, too.

"Who would bring a family photo on a trip?"

"Yeah… Maybe if the trip was for a special reason? I might take a picture of my husband if I went on a trip to a place we visited

together," Shouko-san replies.

If it's a trip for Sakurako-san and gran together, there's a good chance that it's special to them. Maybe they just wanted to visit Sounkyo, or maybe they have memories there. Maybe they wanted to take the real Soutarou with them. I feel both relieved and sad.

Part 3

It takes about one hour to travel from Asahikawa to Sounkyo. It's not very long, but it feels like an eternity when you're crammed in a tiny back seat. When we get to Touma, I notice that there's a new signboard.

"Touma Insect Museum - Chateau Papillon."

It seems to be an establishment that displays insects from both Japan and overseas. I'm sure they have insects other than butterflies, but there must be a lot of butterflies for them to name the place "papillon."

"I wonder… If they have snow apollos there."

It's a butterfly I'm always thinking about. Phantom has likened Sakurako-san to those white butterflies before. I've looked them up online, but I've never seen one in real life before.

"Do we have time to stop by for a bit?"

I want to get out of the car and move around, even if it wasn't for the bug museum. If we don't stop before the Aibetsu interchange, there won't be anywhere to stop until after the Kamikawa-Sounkyo interchange.

"Why not? It's not like rushing is going to do us any good right now."

Even Shouko-san agrees, even though she seems to be enjoying the drive, so we take a short detour. Shouko-san doesn't end up getting out of the car, though.

It's a log cabin style building surrounded by tall trees, situated right next to a campground and an adventure course. The inside of the building has two floors, and there's a dome at the back full of live butterflies, stickbugs, and rhinoceros beetles where you can get close to them. There looks to be 10 000 specimens on display, but I skip the first floor and head straight up the stairs. The reason being that

the first floor is dedicated to beetles, while the second floor has all the butterflies.

"I thought you wouldn't want to come in because you'd think it's gross, sensei."

"You… you do remember that I'm a biology teacher, right?" He says with a clearly dissatisfied expression. "I'm sure I spent a lot more time in nature as a kid than you, Shoutarou. I ran around catching bugs as a kid, but I bet you ate candy and caught monsters in video games."

I must have struck a nerve.

"I'm opposed to playing with lives like that, though. There's a lot less insects now than there was back when I was a kid. You can't just treat them like toys."

Isozaki-sensei suddenly stops walking and turns to look at me.

"That's true. There's less flowers these days, so there's less bugs in turn."

"Seems like it."

Thinking back to when I was a kid, I saw a lot more bugs than I do now. The only bugs I usually see now are the occasional house centipede haunting my home.

"…When I was a kid, the rhinoceros beetle I was raising died," Isozaki-sensei says as he passes me. "It was my first time raising one, so I wasn't sure if it was really dead at first. I thought it might start moving again, so I left it for a while. One day, I checked on it but it was a cesspool of maggots."

"Bleh."

That's appalling, I never want to see that. Of course it's sad to see a rotting corpse, but nothing sends a chill up my spine like maggots crawling around.

"Yeah, it was really disgusting. It used to be so cute, but then it turned into a filthy, terrifying 'corpse'… It might be cruel to say, but I was young, so what happened inside that terrarium was really unpleasant and scary," Isozaki-sensei says disinterestedly while surrounded by countless insect specimens.

I can understand the uncomfortable feeling of a living creature you raised turning into a grotesque "thing". It's no different from a

dead body.

“But I think that’s something important. By coming into contact with small deaths, you learn to fear and hate death. Putting aside whether it’s morally right, sometimes it’s good to learn about death by playing with something else’s life. Fear of death is a far more fundamental emotion to humans than love is.”

Shitara-sensei said that humans are built to be disgusted by dead humans to prevent cannibalism. It’s an instinct that prevents the living humans from contracting infectious diseases from the corpse, rather than being an issue of ethics. Through experiencing many “small” deaths, we learn to fear and avoid death for ourselves.

I understand what he’s saying, but I’m reluctant to agree when it sounds like something one would say about video game characters, rather than the lives of other living creatures. I wonder how Sakurako-san sees “death,” considering she doesn’t feel the same underlying emotions.

Isozaki-sensei hurries up the stairs like he realized he’d said too much. We wander around until we find the section for the butterflies of Hokkaido. I’m struck by how beautiful the butterfly’s translucent, white wings are, covered in lace-like black markings.

“So this is a snow apollo… I thought it would be whiter.”

“I think the distinct black patterns are like Kujou-san, with her strong personality.”

I can see what he means. It looks so delicate. After a minute or two of looking at the butterfly, I hear Isozaki-sensei snicker behind me.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing, really.”

He starts walking away. I feel like I’m being made fun of. While I’m trying to think of what to say back, Isozaki-sensei heads down the stairs. I chase after him. I see Shouko-san, who should have been waiting in the car, standing in a small hallway. She’s looking at pictures and decorations themed around insects.

“I thought you were waiting in the car…”

“I got bored. Hey, come see this.” She’s pointing at one of the pictures.

“What is it?”

“These pictures… I think Kaoruko-san drew them.”

“Huh?”

She points at several different pictures. They’re all butterflies.

“A lot of people from my husband’s family painted. Even my husband did some oil painting as a hobby. Because of that, I’ve studied art a bit.”

Among the pictures, there’s one of a white butterfly that I’m familiar with. A snow apollo spreads its wings across the wall.

“I’ve seen this painting before. But why is it here?”

While we’re talking about it, a woman, who seems to be a staff member, asks us what’s wrong.

“That picture was donated by someone living in Asahikawa about 2 or 3 weeks ago. It seemed hard for them to part with, as a family member painted it.” She smiles fondly, telling us that she really liked this picture of the snow Apollo. She says that they gave it to the museum because it didn’t feel right to just throw it away.

“Um, could you please tell me a bit more about those people?!”

I surprise myself by realizing how close I’m standing to her. She tilts her head, looking troubled.

“It was a tall woman and an old lady. I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything else. I was in the middle of something at the time.”

“Do you at least know where they were heading?l

“Their destination…” She looks uncomfortable since I won’t stop questioning her. She thinks for a moment, then looks like she remembers something. “Oh, that’s right, the old woman mentioned the Sounkyo ravine. She looked really happy to go, since she hadn’t been in several decades.”

Finally, I can be sure that we’re heading in the right direction. I can feel the hair on the back of my neck stand up when I turn my back on that painting.

Part 4

I wonder if it’s a coincidence that Kaoruko-san painted a snow apollo, or if it’s somehow related to Hanabusa. I’m interested in learning more about this “Kaoruko Kujou.” She paints butterflies, just

like Hanabusa… But she's a woman, and her age doesn't match up. I don't think she's Phantom.

"What kind of person was Sakurako-san's aunt… Kaoruko-san?" I ask Shouko-san from the backseat. She hesitates to answer at first.

"Let's see… I think Kaoruko-san was similar to Sakurako-san. She was a rather mysterious person. As a woman myself, I found her bewitching. Beautiful, kind, but a little scary, like she had some kind of secret." Shouko-san stops to take a short rest to think. "…I'm sorry, I didn't know her very well… If you want to know more, you'll have to ask Saa-chan or Ozawa-san. I don't think it's my place to tell you about this."

I feel like there's some kind of hidden meaning behind her reply.

"Then at least tell me this… If Kaoruko-san was still alive, how old would she be now? And did she have any chronic diseases, particularly something congenital?"

"Umm, let me think… I think she would be around 50. I heard she was rather sickly as a child… But the same goes for Saa-chan. For Sakurako, it was because she had a small appetite and didn't like eating meat… Maybe it was the same for Kaoruko-san."

"I heard she died in a river, and the body was never found. What caused her to-"

"Shoutarou." Isozaki-sensei scolds me for asking too many invasive questions.

"…I'm sorry."

"It's fine, I don't mind. Maybe try asking Ozawa-san, since she's known the Kujou family for a long time." Shouko-san looks up at the blue sky with a worried expression on her face. I think she's just saying that so I won't feel bad.

The inside of the car is silent. All I hear is the sound of the engine, and the tires on the road. Isozaki-sensei doesn't seem to like listening to music while driving. The way I have to sit doesn't even allow me to doze off, so I have to put up with it until we arrive at Sounkyo ravine.

We soon arrive at a hot spring town on a steep part of the valley. It's at the base of Mount Kurodake in the Daisetsuzan mountain

range. We pass by a major convenience store with all the usual bright lights, but it's separated from the hot spring district so it doesn't ruin the scenery. The Toudou group's aim with the hotel is to make it a relaxing place.

"It's pretty busy here around this time."

I look at the clock, it's just after 3pm. We're just in time for check-in. Even though it's a weekday tomorrow, there's lots of families and groups of tourists. Shouko-san suggests we wait a little while so we don't bother the staff since they're so busy.

"We're going to go ask around for a bit, then."

Leaving Shouko-san behind, Isozaki-sensei and I leave the hotel. I remember seeing a cafe before, so we drive a short way up the hill. If they were staying here for 3 days and 2 nights, they probably would have gone to a cafe to kill time.

"It's already the time of year for the leaves to change colour ," Isozaki-sensei murmurs while looking up at the trees with their fall colours slowly showing through their brilliant green.

In addition to the gorgeous fall colours , they hold an ice festival here in the winter. If possible, I'd like the opportunity to come back here again some time. We cross the ropeway to the central part of town where there's a resort meant to imitate the mountains of Canada. The cafe is stylish, and sells lots of little decorations and trinkets.

"A grandmother and her granddaughter? Let me think…"

I ask the woman watching the shop if she'd seen Sakurako-san and gran. "Hmmm…" she looks troubled. That's understandable, though. She wouldn't remember a customer who came in once or twice several weeks ago. When I frantically describe their appearances, she just gives a vague response of "Maybe I saw them…"

There's a delicious looking cake on the menu, so I know Sakurako-san would have ordered that. I'm hesitant to leave without buying anything, so after looking at the knick knacks, we buy 2 cheesecakes to go. I'm feeling a bit hungry, so I actually wanted to eat the fantastic looking curry in the picture on the menu.

"Wait!" The employee calls out to us as we're leaving the store.

“It’s about that pair you mentioned before,” she says as she hurries out of the shop. “Just now the owner of the cafe told me that a taxi driver said something strange the other day. Apparently there was a young lady and an old woman wearing Japanese clothes walking along the side of the road together.”

“Walking?”

“Yeah. They said they were going to an abandoned inn nearby. When asked why they were going to a place like that, they said it’s a place full of memories from when their family visited, so they wanted to go again.”

The abandoned inn is quite a distance away on foot. The driver was worried and offered to give them a ride, but they said they were okay and declined.

“I noticed… That something seemed off about them.”

The woman sounds worried. I smile politely and thank her, but my heart feels like it’s about to explode. I ask Isozaki-sensei to please take me there, but he’s reluctant to leave Shouko-san behind. I’m very aware that he’s incredibly unenthusiastic about going, but I can’t help but want to go. I regret not bringing my bike, but there’s no space for it in Isozaki-sensei's beloved car. We go along National Route 39 toward Asahikawa for several minutes.

“There’s a lot of deer around here.”

I’m too nervous to respond to Isozaki-sensei’s mumbling. Why would those two walk to a place like that? To reminisce about late members of the family? Why go through the effort of walking all that way? Something about this is giving me a really bad feeling.

After around 5 minutes, we arrive at the abandoned inn. It must have taken quite a while to walk here. We have to push through knotweed and bamboo grass to reach the inn. The front entrance is locked.

The inn is situated near a river. A fallen tree has scratched the side of the building, like a giant claw mark. Around the side is a dining area enclosed in glass. The door is unlocked, so we enter through there.

“We should leave… This is dangerous,” Isozaki-sensei says quietly.

“No way. You can wait in the car if you want to.”

This place has definitely seen better days. I know he doesn’t want to be here, so I’m not going to force him to come with me. He doesn’t seem happy about what I said, but he follows me anyway.

The inn looks like it’s falling apart. The roof has even caved in, in some spots. There’s signs that other people have explored this place before us. Surprisingly, there’s no graffiti. It smells like mold and dust in here. For whatever reason, I feel like I have to get to the second floor. There’s guest rooms up here.

A big fly buzzes past us. Sunlight is streaming in through the big windows in the hallway. The light illuminates the countless flies swarming the room. I notice that there’s no flies near the windows.

“It’s a northern blowfly. They’re common in Hokkaido, but… I have a bad feeling about this,” Isozaki-sensei says quietly.

I feel the same way. I’ve seen these swarms of blue many times, mostly on corpses.

“Ah…” I notice two sets of footprints in the dust. “Look… footprints.”

They’re headed straight for one of the guest rooms at the back. There’s no sign of them heading back out. Even if humans are like butterflies, they can’t fly away without leaving a trace.

“Well, we’ve already come this far.” I feel something tug on my sleeve so I can’t step forward.

“Sensei?”

“I’m going to say this one more time. Shoutarou, go home. Leave this to the police.”

“But I need to check if we even need to call the police.”

I try to shake him off, but he’s surprisingly strong. Maybe he’s trying to show me how serious he is with his grip.

“Just let Utsumi-kun do that! Go home!” Isozaki-sensei is running out of patience.

I smell something bad, like rotting meat.

“I’d feel bad for Utsumi-san if I made him do this.”

“It’s his job as a police officer to see things that high schoolers shouldn’t.” He looks so serious, but I can’t help but laugh.

“I’m fine with seeing corpses, sensei.” I’ve seen lots of them before. In just over a year, I’ve seen all kinds of dead people. “I’ll be fine… The smell made me feel sick at first, but it doesn’t bother me anymore.”

“…Shoutarou.”

From the flies and the smell, I can already imagine what I’ll find in that room. Of course, it could always be an animal that wandered in, so I have to check. What if it ended up being those two?

“They might have been killed. I can’t imagine Kujou-san committing suicide.”

“Really? You’ve said before that only Sakurako-san herself can understand what she’s thinking.”

I thought I knew Sakurako-san really well, but I have no idea where she went. I thought that there was no way Sakurako-san could be dead, but faced with the situation before me, I’m not feeling as confident. I manage to shake Isozaki-sensei off my arm, so I try to head for the room, but he gets a firm grip on my shoulder this time.

“Please let me go.”

“No, I can’t do that. I may be irresponsible, but I’d never let my student do something that will only make them unhappy.”

“I know that.”

I know that he’s still feeling guilty over what happened with Hitoe-san and the others. That’s why he came all this way, despite his complaints.

“I know that even though you pretend to be indifferent, you really like people, sensei.”

That’s why I visited him on that rainy day. He’s similar to Sakurako-san; they’re both kind under their blunt exteriors.

“Seeing corpses… Is just part of the job when I’m with Sakurako-san.” Death is always looming over her.

“…Still, I don’t think Kujou-san would choose a method like this.”

But what if gran wanted to die? Would Sakurako-san stop her, or let it happen?

I free myself from Isozaki-sensei’s grip, and start walking down the hallway again. The sliding door leading to the back room is closed. Even though it’s closed, there’s still a gap between the door

and the wall because the building is falling apart. Another big fly comes out through the gap. Isozaki-sensei's expression is stiff.

"There are two kinds of people in the world… Those who can stay calm around a corpse, and those who can't. The latter will be traumatized for life. Luckily, I'm the former."

I don't know which one Isozaki-sensei is. I ask him to stay in the hallway. He nods like he's given up on trying to convince me not to go. I have to check what's behind the door, no matter what. For my own sake.

"No matter what you see… It's not your responsibility. You don't have to see this, Shoutarou," Isozaki-sensei says.

"You're right… So be sure to help me if something happens."

Honestly, I just want to cry and run away. I don't want to stay here for even one more second. But I can't do that. *Something* is pulling me forward. The voice of the dead. As I softly open the door, the air stirs slightly… All the flies take to the air.

"…"

There's light in the room. The roof has crumbled in a few places, letting the outside air in. That must be how the flies got in. Thankfully, the openings helped reduce the odour .

"There are… Two bodies."

A woman in a dress is hanging from a large beam. It was probably a white dress. Her long, black hair is hanging down. She has her back to the door… I can't see her face.

The body of a small woman wearing Japanese style clothes is lying near her feet. Her clothes are high quality, but not flashy. There's maggots wriggling underneath her clothes. She's lying front down, so I can't check what her face looks like. Her hair is a mixture of white and grey, and was probably tied in a bun. It's hard to tell, because the body is starting to fall apart. Her hair is unkempt, and her hairpin is falling out. I wonder if someone was violent with her?

"…Are the bodies in different states?"

I can't touch them, but at a glance, it looks like they're in different states of decomposition. I realize why right away. The hanging body is being hit by sunlight. I'm surprised by how calm I am. Maybe part of my heart has died.

I take out the gloves in my pocket. I push my fingers in, then snap the nitrile against my wrist. Just like a certain somebody. I kneel next to the corpse that's lying down. I gently touch her, and see a painful looking mark on her neck. For some reason, laughter bubbles up through my throat.

"Ha…. Ahahaha!"

"Shoutarou…?" Isozaki-sensei calls out to me with a pale face.

"There's a short woman lying on the floor here, she has a mark on her neck!"

"What?"

"The marks indicate she was strangled. This wasn't suicide."

I thought for sure they had both hanged themselves, and one of them had fallen from the rope, but that isn't the case.

"The mark is crossed on the back of her neck. She must have been strangled from behind. Usually when someone hangs themself, there won't be a mark like that. She wouldn't have fallen unconscious, so she would have had time to untie the rope, unless she was unable."

"Then… You mean…"

"That's right. It's likely that the hanged woman murdered the woman on the floor." I feel laughter bubbling up again. There's nothing wrong, I'm just relieved. "A woman in a dress murdered an old woman. Hahaha…. I'm glad. I'm really glad!"

"You're glad…?"

"Don't you get it? That makes her a murderer, right? That means these two definitely aren't Sakurako-san and gran!"

Yeah, they just look similar at a glance. I'm sure it isn't them.

"Sakurako-san isn't a murderer, and gran… Gran would never let Sakurako-san kill her. If Sakurako-san tried to kill her, gran would kill herself before Sakurako-san could finish the job. That's the kind of person she is."

If these two corpses were Sakurako-san and gran, gran would have to be the one hanging. I could see gran killing Sakurako-san and then herself to settle some kind of dispute. She's stubborn like that. It's exactly that stubbornness that allows her to keep Sakurako-san on track, so she'll never commit a crime.

I reach into my pocket. I pull out Sakurako-san's compass with a built-in ruler. I understand why she always carries this around with her. I crouch down in the colder, shadier part of the room so I can measure the maggots.

—Listen up, boy. Maggots are extremely useful for determining how long someone has been dead. It's easy, you just have to measure the size of the maggots on the corpse. If the maggots are 1mm long, they're two days old. If they're 2mm, they're 3 days old. See? It's simple. You should remember that.

I carefully line the compass up with a maggot. This one is 3mm long.

"It's been four days since she died."

If it was past the first lifecycle, I'd see some of the reddish brown cocoons laying around, but I don't see any of those. Based on these tiny, 3mm long maggots, I can tell that this corpse has been here for 4 days. These two were still alive just 4 days ago. Sakurako-san came to Sounkyo 2 weeks ago.

"I'm glad it wasn't those two. If it was Sakurako-san…"

I head back to the entrance of the room. I couldn't help myself from laughing before, but now I can't stop myself from crying. I feel happy, sad, and guilty. It wasn't Sakurako-san and gran, but there were still two corpses waiting here.

"I feel bad for them. How sad must it have been… Sakurako-san and gran came here because they had fond memories here, but someone had died here."

I wonder what Sakurako-san and gran thought about and talked about on their way here. And what did that woman feel when she brought the old lady here to kill her then commit suicide? I cling to Isozaki-sensei and cry in the hallway for a while. Why do people have to die?

Part 5

The police arrive soon after we report the situation. Every time I report something like this, I'm worried they'll suspect me, or think I'm

prank calling them.

“There’s a faint rope mark around her neck. It looks like a forced double suicide, so you might want to look into the woman who hanged herself more. It could have been a murder.”

I try to explain everything I know to the police officers, but they look suspicious of me. If only Sakurako-san were here…

“Why are you here in the first place?”

I was worried they would ask that.

“We were looking for some acquaintances of ours who are missing. We thought it might have been these two, but it wasn’t.” Isozaki-sensei starts answering in my stead. The police look at us even more suspiciously now.

“Not you again!”

I hear a loud, deep voice coming from outside the inn. Whoever it is doesn’t sound happy. I look outside to see who it is, only to see a familiar looking “sly old man.” This is the second time we’ve met.

“Thank you very much for reinvestigating that case… It was my friend’s grandma.”

Once he lowers his head into a bow, he makes an annoyed expression. He’s the police officer from when Sakurako-san and I found the corpse of Kougami’s grandma last year.

“It was a pretty big incident back then. Oh, you’re not with that other person this time?”

I shake my head, and briefly explain the situation around her disappearance. Surprisingly, he seriously listens to me, and suggests requesting a police search if I get too worried. Unfortunately, only relatives can request one, though. Being Sakurako-san’s “guardian” won’t cut it. Only blood relatives, employers, or people in a common-law relationship can request a search. In this case, that would be Ariwara-san. Unfortunately, I don’t meet the requirements.

“Anyway, it seems you’ve picked some things up from her.” He scolds me for inspecting the bodies before the police arrived, then sees us off to the car.

“Then are you headed down the same path?” He asks as I climb into the passenger seat. I don’t know what to say for a moment.

"…Yeah, probably," I eventually say, then nod. I've always known it deep down, but this is the first time I've said it.

As the car begins to move, Isozaki-sensei looks displeased. No, maybe it's more like he's in a seriously bad mood. He's chewing mint gum, as if he's trying to get rid of the scent of corpses in the car.

"…I want to change my course from now on. I… want to go to medical school. I want to be a forensic pathologist."

"…" He doesn't respond.

"It's not just because of Sakurako-san's influence. I like learning about living things… And I think Shitara-sensei and his assistant, Aoba-san, are amazing." I'm kind of reluctant to do something that Aoba-san suggested, but this is something I've been thinking about for a long time. "Sensei, are you listening?"

"…You'll have to study a lot, based on your current grades," He eventually says in a low voice. "I thought you would have wanted to make specimens."

He sounds like Sakurako-san. I make a wry smile. Well, I don't dislike making specimens.

"It's just… I want to listen to the voices of the dead." They're not voices that just anyone can hear.

"Stop it. If that was all it took, I'd quit being a teacher and become a gardener. I'd buy a big plot of land somewhere near Higashikawa, and invite Shouko-san over to grow roses with me," Isozaki-sensei says with a big sigh.

"I'd hate that."

"Why? Flowers are a lot better than corpses!" He shouts.

Sure, flowers are more beautiful than dead bodies. But there's something about "death" that draws me in. Like a moth to a flame.

Part 6

"You stink," Shouko-san says with disgust as soon as we get back to the hotel.

"Well… We did find two dead people."

She looks surprised, of course. When I tell her that it wasn't Sakurako-san, she just says, "of course it wasn't!" She takes Isozaki-sensei and I to a hotel room. Apparently this is the room that

Sakurako-san and gran stayed at. It's a luxury room with an open air bath.

Shouko-san tosses us into the tub. I wanted to soak in the hot spring, but not like this. I have to wash my whole body twice with this French soap that smells like roses to get the smell off. It's awkward bathing with my teacher. He's more muscular than I expected, probably because he does yoga.

Apparently the hot springs in Sounkyo are good for your skin, and help with muscle aches. I hope that means I'm not sore tomorrow after all the moving around I did today. I can see the minerals in the water swirling around every time I move. The water is kind of milky from all the minerals dissolved in it, but I guess that means it's effective.

"Now that I think about it… Kujou-san might have driven around, rather than walked. That would mean other people wouldn't have seen where she went."

"Oh…"

Isozaki-sensei soaks up to his chin, and blows bubbles while presumably trying to absorb the beautifying minerals into his skin. But what he said is true. I have to calm down. I look out at the scenery as the sun sets. I start to feel embarrassed again.

"But, you know… I'm glad," Isozaki-sensei mumbles. "If it really were Kujou-san back there and I had to comfort you… I'm exhausted just thinking about it," Isozaki-sensei says with a sigh of relief.

"Please at least do that much, you're my teacher."

"I don't need to clean up your mess when you cause trouble outside of school. I'm not your mom." He's not fatherly at all, let alone motherly.

"But… Sakurako-san has taught me things I would never have learned in school, or my everyday life."

I don't know if it's a good or a bad thing that I've let someone become so important to me that their death would impact me that deeply. But I do know that this is better than closing myself off and not letting myself experience sadness. That's why I have to treasure the present. I'm especially grateful for the people around me right now,

particularly my mom. It's too embarrassing for me to thank her for everything she's done for me, even though I should really tell her.

"Hanging out with Sakurako-san has taught me a lot, with her encyclopedic knowledge. I've learned about more than just bones and corpses, too."

"…Yes, I will admit that she's quite knowledgeable. Still, I feel sorry for her." Isozaki-sensei sighs.

"Why do you feel sorry for her?"

"She can't sort out what knowledge she needs. She could have been an amazing researcher if she had been able to go to university, but that didn't happen. She can't tell what's important to remember, so she remembers everything. That's why I feel bad for her."

"But isn't remembering everything a good thing?"

I don't know why that's a bad thing or why he feels sorry for her because of it. Isozaki-sensei turns away from me and rests his chin on the edge of the bath so I can't see his face. His back is all red from the heat.

"You know… I hate Kujou-san."

"Really?"

"She's beautiful to look at, but she's kind of like a cut leaf coneflower or mint. Plants that are too strong cause the plants around them to wither . They have to be carefully maintained, and handled with caution. She's like bioterrorism personified."

"…"

I have no idea what the hell he's talking about. Sure, Sakurako-san can be confusing sometimes, but beautiful flowers can still capture peoples' heart, even if they're poisonous. I know deep in my heart that I should avoid Sakurako-san, but I can't help but want to stay with her.

When we get out of the bath, there's a change of clothes for each of us laid out. Shorts with brown bears on them, t-shirts with Asappy (the Asahikawa mascot) on them, and an Hawaiian patterned jinbei.

"…Why do we have to wear this?"

"Because the clothes we were wearing before are in the wash."

These clothes are absolutely soul crushing, but I don't want to walk around naked either. Isozaki-sensei looks like he would rather be naked than wear this.

"I'm never getting out," he says before going back into the bath. I end up needing to rescue him after he got too hot and passed out.

"So, did you learn anything?"

"Yes. From what I gathered, they stayed here for 2 nights. It was about 2 weeks ago that they were here. According to a lady who works here, they mentioned that they were going to travel around both inside and outside of Hokkaido."

Shouko-san says while she spreads out a sheet of colourful chiyogami paper. (Very fancy, thick origami paper) The paper has a vibrant Japanese-style pattern on it.

"Apparently there were some tourists from overseas here before them, and they left this paper behind. The staff member I was talking to said they taught her how to make an origami butterfly. As far as I can tell from what she said, they didn't seem like strange people."

I remember gran saying before that she used to love making origami as a kid. I can imagine gran and Sakurako-san sitting in this room, folding origami together.

"Ozawa-san has been working for the Kujou family for a long time, and she hasn't been able to go on a trip that whole time, right? I wonder if they planned to sell off some of the artwork in the house to get some money to take Ozawa-san on one last trip."

"…In that case, they could have said something, instead of leaving with no warning." I didn't mean to let my negativity slip out. Shouko-san has a lonely smile on her face.

"You're right, but… They need their time alone together. We can't even imagine what they're going through. I don't think anyone can, or should, get in their way."

I still barely know anything about the Kujou family's past. Shouko-san's words are heavy, and I can't help but feel like I'm an outsider to them again.

Final part

Isozaki-sensei takes me home and kicks me out of his car. I was able to narrowly escape from the “eccentric” fashion choice made for me in Sounkyo, but Isozaki-sensei wasn’t so lucky. His suit had to be sent to be dry cleaned, so he was forced to wear *that* until he got home. He chose the Hawaiian patterned jinbei in order to preserve at least some of his dignity. He doesn’t actually look half bad in it. I guess you can make anything work as long as you’re blessed with good looks. After saying goodbye to Isozaki-sensei, I hear barking from the other side of the door to my house.

“H-Hector?!” As soon as I open the door, I’m tackled by a fluffy, white creature.

“You don’t know how many times I called, trying to get through to you!” My mom is standing behind Hector, clearly unhappy.

Now that I think about it, I usually keep my phone in the pocket of my parka that had to be washed. My phone didn’t go through the wash, of course. It was just put in a plastic bag with my other belongings, so I forgot about it.

“But why is Hector here?”

“You see, I got a call from Kujou-san earlier saying the person taking care of him has to go on a business trip to Borneo. She isn’t coming back for a little while still, so she wants you to take care of him.”

“What?! She called you? Herself?”

My mom nods. I can’t believe it. We just missed each other.

“Did… Did she seem well?”

“Yeah, she was the same as always.”

After the phone call, Sawa-san brought Hector over to our house. My cute little fluff ball. It’s been so long since I last hugged him. It’s like a switch was flipped, and he starts intensely licking my face.

“Did she say where she is?”

“No, she didn’t say much.”

Apparently it was a one-sided conversation, and Sakurako-san hung up as soon as she said what she needed to. I see, so that’s what she meant by “the same as always”. Hector demands to be pet, so I rub him with a bitter smile.

“Did you at least hear any sounds in the background during the call?” Anything is fine, I just need something that I can use to follow her.

“Oh, now that you mention it…” my mom says, nodding. “It was extremely quiet.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t hear a single noise. It was so quiet that it felt strange for a moment. I’m sure it came from inside a phone booth.”

A phone booth… Pay phones are pretty rare these days. She doesn’t have a cell phone, so a pay phone is the only way she can call people if she’s outside.

“But… Are there any hot springs with a phone booth?”

My questions bubble up out of my mouth. What about the hotel in Sounkyo that I went to today?

“Who knows? But it’d have to be a pretty nice place, right? She wouldn’t be staying in a cheap place for so long. If it’s an expensive room, that could explain how quiet it was.”

She has a point. Even after all the running around I did today, I didn’t get any closer. All I saw was some sad corpses.

“But I’m glad I got to see Isozaki-sensei wearing that Hawaiian jinbei,” I whisper to Hector while looking into his shiny, dark eyes. He tilts his head like he’s asking what I’m saying. I smile and ask him if he wants to go on a walk.

A few days later, the news is talking about the tragic, forced double suicide at the abandoned inn. They were discovered about 4 days after their death. The woman in her 20s was suffering from her own illness, while also taking care of her grandmother who had dementia. She chose to end both their lives in a place they had fond memories of. There’s an interview with one of the staff members at the long term care facility that she was staying at. The staff member is crying, and saying how they wish they could have done more.

That’s right. If you’re in trouble, you have to ask for help. I would do anything it takes to help. I’ve thought about that countless times, ever since Sakurako-san disappeared, but I’m not family, so there isn’t much I can do. No matter how important she is to me. I may be a

substitute for Soutarou-kun, but I'm not him. I'm not their family. Every time I remember those corpses I found, the reality of it hurts me deeply.

Second Bone: Ashen Pursuit

Part 1

This is a story from 5 years ago, in early fall. My mom, brother, and I were shopping at the supermarket, and decided to take a look at the food stalls in the parking lot on our way home. They were set up for the fall harvest festival. The stands were selling fresh fall produce, like potatoes and pumpkins. There were even stalls with mushroom soup and grilled chicken. There's no escape from the scent of chicken sizzling over charcoal.

We bought 3 pork skewers, 3 chicken skewers, and some shinkoyaki. All three of us walked home with big smiles on our faces. The bright red sun had almost fully disappeared over the horizon. The air was still hot from the heat of the day. As I watched some kids running home, I noticed some red lights up ahead.

"Was there an accident?" My brother asked.

It was unusual to see so many police cars in one spot like that. My brother and mom looked at each other, then asked me, "should we go home a different way?"

"I don't mind," I said seriously.

I felt like I was being treated like a kid. My brother offered to carry some bags for our mom, then said, "in that case, let's get

going.” He must have wanted to hurry past the accident. Mom didn’t seem to mind, either.

I remember feeling anxious and scared at how different the street I was so used to seeing looked; but I also felt strangely excited. I was curious… I was just excited to see what had happened. The police lights illuminated a crowd of people. There were men and women of all ages. More and more police cars started to show up, all with their sirens blaring.

An older woman came out of one of the nearby apartments, wiping her hands off on her apron. “Oh dear, so it really was an accident?” She mumbled.

“What happened?” My mom asked.

“I heard a lot of noise earlier. I could hear a car suddenly braking, then a huge bang, so I figured it was a car crash.”

The woman hurried back inside to make sure her food wasn’t burning. I remember thinking that it was irresponsible of her. An ambulance drove by us and stopped to help. The accident happened right where a thicker road met the beltline.

“…”

As we approached the noisy scene of the accident, the atmosphere told me it wasn't too serious. There were police officers asking people on the street and talking through a megaphone, asking if anyone saw the accident or if anyone knows the woman involved. There were 6 police cars stopped around the beltline and thinner road. There were people everywhere. I remember the grim look on the faces of the police officers wearing yellow vests while controlling traffic or putting up caution tape.

“I was walking my dog and came to see what all the commotion was about.”

“I saw the accident, she wasn’t moving at all.”

“It’s funny, you don’t normally see people getting hit at this time of day.”

Two girls around my age are talking and laughing, as if something terrible didn’t just happen. It’s true that hit and runs don’t normally happen at this time, since there aren’t many people out.

People were saying it was a white car, and drove off really fast after. I don't see how it's "funny" though. I immediately felt ashamed about being a rubberneck, no different from them. My mom and brother both had a rigid expression.

"Let's go, Taro."

"Yeah…"

My brother pushed me from behind while we pushed through the crowds of people saying "Woah, cool!" in delighted voices, and taking pictures of the accident.

Soon, we got near the actual scene of the accident. Dodging all the people made it hard to walk. Just as I was about to trip and fall, I turned and saw the crash.

"…"

In the bright red lights from the ambulance and police cars, I saw the paramedics frantically performing CPR near the street lamp. It was a woman. She had a large, round stomach. Her limbs were limply tossed about with each push against her chest. Her hands were totally white. The image of her arms being so pale despite the evening sun and lights from the emergency vehicles is still burned deep into my mind.

I looked away, and saw the things she was carrying scattered all over the road. A torn, reusable bag that was carrying daily necessities. Treats aimed at toddlers. And the same pouch that I got when we got food from the yakitori shop. The memory of that cruel reality spread out before my eyes made me dizzy. I suddenly got a horrendous feeling in the pit of my stomach, and ran through the crowd. Even after I got away, my heart was screaming in horror.

"…The person who hit her was probably heading home after drinking at a yakiniku place," my mom murmured while she kept walking.

"Yeah, it looks like she couldn't get away in time." My brother nodded.

During the fall holiday in Hokkaido, it's natural for yakiniku to follow when a group of people gathers outside. Alcohol being involved is far from unusual, as well, but it isn't right to drive after. I

just wanted the three of us to go home as soon as possible. I wanted my family to be somewhere safer.

That evening, the Hokkaido news had a short story about the accident. A woman who lived nearby was unconscious after being struck while on her way home from shopping. The culprit hasn't been caught. I ended up not being able to touch the yakitori we bought that day.

The next morning, the newscaster reported that the culprit had been caught. At first the offender said he didn't remember the accident very well, but later changed his statement to say that he "fled out of fear." He denies that he drank any alcohol. The same day that the criminal appeared, the woman died.

She was an expecting mother. The culprit admitted to having a little bit to drink at his friend's house before the accident. He must have ran away so the police wouldn't see that he was drunk… In the end, he wasn't charged with reckless driving. He was only sentenced to three and a half years in prison, since he turned himself in.

Only three and a half years. Even though he ran away without helping. Even though she was clearly pregnant. Since she was buying treats for a toddler, she probably had another child, as well. She was probably rushing home so she could eat her yakitori as soon as possible. He simultaneously took the lives of two people, and destroyed a family. The fact that he only got three and a half years makes me furious. I just don't think it's right.

It was just bad luck that I happened to witness that particular accident. Tragic accidents and events happen every day, all over the world. People die or suffer for no good reason all the time. So, like always, I forgot about that incident. I always took a different path so I didn't go down the street where it happened, but soon, I stopped even thinking about why I took that route. Once going down a different street became commonplace, the accident itself became history. That was back during a time when I wasn't used to seeing the "death" of people.

It's been 10 days since I went to Sounkyo with Isozaki-sensei to search for Sakurako-san. My mom is getting home late today, which

is unusual. I haven't been able to get in touch with her all evening. She isn't replying to my messages, and my grandpas haven't heard anything, either.

"What happened?" I ask Hector, and lay down on the couch. His tail starts wagging right away, and he smiles at me. I turn on the TV. My favourite pet show is on.

The Kujou family doesn't seem to watch much TV. Sakurako-san only seems to watch the news. Hector went crazy for the animal shows, since he hadn't seen one before. He's usually so hyper, but he's completely focused on the TV now. According to my mom, he brings her the remote control so she turns on a show for him when he's bored. My mom has even started recording shows for him to watch. He's terrifyingly smart.

My mom keeps saying, "there's no way I'm looking after that dog!" But I don't think she means it, especially when she watches TV together with him.

Hector is starting to get anxious about my mom being gone so long. It's already past 7pm. I know she's not a kid, and she can do whatever she wants, and maybe she has work to do…. I keep trying to think of excuses to make myself feel better. Maybe she's just busy, or her phone died. She's always letting her phone die, after all. But with everything going on with Phantom, I can't help but think something might have happened… I have a reason to be scared.

On top of everything else, I'm hungry. Unfortunately, I don't have any instant ramen. I wish we had one of my beloved yakisoba bentou. It's even better if you sprinkle some coriander in the soup. When my mom gets home late, I usually go out to eat, but it's getting too late for that now. Since I'm a high school student, I can cook for myself if I need to, but I'm not very good at cooking, and the fridge is practically empty. Since today is Friday, my mom was probably planning to stock up on ingredients tomorrow,

I mobilize my meager cooking knowledge, and take out an onion, a scallion, some salmon flakes, eggs, and a bit of lettuce. I found a piece of wasabi in the freezer, too. There's only one thing I can make with these ingredients. I start warming up some frozen rice in the microwave while I grate the wasabi, chop the onions and

scallions, then fry them with sesame oil and plenty of salmon flakes. Once the rice is heated through, I add it to one side of the frying pan, and put an egg on the other side. Once it cooks, I add some soy sauce and mix it around for a while before turning off the heat. To finish it off, I add some chopped lettuce and a heaping spoonful of wasabi. It's the Tatewaki family's signature salmon fried rice with lettuce - wasabi flavoured .

The salmon is salty enough that I don't need to add any other seasonings, and the wasabi accents it perfectly. I can't resist the scent of soy sauce and eggs. My stomach starts growling before I can even get it onto a plate. The meal isn't complete without some instant wakame soup. I put a spoonful of wasabi in the soup to add some extra flavour .

Wasabi grows naturally behind my Nagayama grandpa's house, so I bring some home whenever I go to visit. It tastes best when you grate it fresh out of the ground, then put it on freshly made rice with soy sauce. It's so spicy that my eyes are watering, but I can't stop eating it once I've started. It's even good on cold tofu, yakiniku, or pasta with tomato sauce.

Eventually, my mom comes home exhausted and flops down. I ask her what happened, but she just says, "I'll tell you later," then goes to her room to get changed. I dish up some fried rice for her while I wait. My mom says that it tastes good, but she's definitely lying. If she actually liked it, she would have looked more energetic than this.

"So? What happened?"

My mom is laying on her stomach, eating fried rice, and petting Hector. She takes a gulp of barley tea and sighs before she starts speaking.

"Actually, I was called in by the police."

"The police?! Why?!"

Have the police finally put me on watchlist? That doesn't seem to be the case. My mom's face is all red.

"I didn't do anything wrong, but apparently the police are looking for one of my tenants."

"So you were just brought in for questioning?"

“I was just there to tell them what I know, it wasn’t anything serious. The lease was signed by the occupant’s SO, so when they didn’t pay their rent, I went to their SO’s older sister, who signed as the guarantor. She paid the rent for them, so I didn’t have any reason to complain…”

“So what happened?”

She seems hesitant to say anything else. I urge her to continue, since I can’t bear the silence.

“That person… The police are looking for them. Apparently they were at fault in a hit and run a few years ago. Do you remember that?”

“A hit and run?”

At fault in a hit and run a few years ago… I can’t quite remember at first.

“Yeah, don’t you remember? We passed by it on the way home from shopping.”

“Oh!”

Right, that incident. My mom nods after noticing that I remember. Unfortunately, since the victim wasn’t using the crosswalk, the offender turned himself in, it couldn’t be proven that he was drunk, and he claimed he “deeply regrets what happened,” he was allowed to return to society after just three and a half years, despite killing a pregnant woman with another child at home.

“But his wife divorced him while he was in prison, and he couldn’t find a job after getting out. Also, have you heard about the robberies in the Kagura area? Apparently he matches the description of that person, too.”

However, when the police investigated his house, they found that nobody had come back for a while. The next step was to contact my mom.

“It was a woman who signed the contract. The police asked me a lot of questions, but I don’t remember a man being there at all.”

The young woman who signed the contract, Yua Irie, is currently missing.

“The rent was late last month. I couldn’t get in touch with her, so I contacted her older sister. She paid for it right away. I didn’t really

give it a second thought after that."

My mom says she figured the older sister was just lending the younger sister money for rent, or something. It's possible that the woman was involved in an incident, but apparently she isn't very nice to begin with. She keeps stirring up trouble, so she has to change part time jobs often.

"Remember that man who got seriously injured and was unconscious before? Fortunately he regained consciousness, but he was afraid of being caught by the police, so he ran away. All thanks to the police investigating that room," my mom says with a big sigh.

It makes bad rumours start, so people want to move out, and it's hard to get new tenants to move in. All of a sudden, an incident in the past has become entwined with my life again. I pet Hector's soft, white fur to try to shake off the bad feeling I have.

Part 2

"Aren't you cursed, Tatewaki?" Azechi says while eating her egg sandwich during lunch break.

"What?"

"I mean, bad things always seem to be happening to you, right? Should we get you a charm to ward against curses or something? Oh, I know! I'll make you a strap with a healing crystal, so gimme some money for it." She holds out her hand for me to pay her.

Maybe I shouldn't have said anything about the apartment…

"No, I'm fine. It's my mom's problem this time, not mine."

"But I can sense that the stars are in an unlucky alignment."

"Could you stop saying things like that?" Kougami makes a meek expression. She's eating some pungent, bitter nanban miso wrapped in shiso leaves. The smell is ruining my chikuwa sandwich for me.

"You've always been unlucky, haven't you, Shoutarou?"

"Imai…"

Like he's one to talk. I feel like I'm surrounded by enemies on all sides.

"Back in elementary school, 6 of us went to our first shrine visit of the year together. 5 of us pulled 'great luck' but Shoutarou here

pulled bad luck. After that, he lost on his kinako stick 8 times in a row."

That story is from so long ago that I don't think it should count towards my bad luck anymore.

"…Don't you have a pretty good chance of winning one of those after 3-5 tries?" Azechi covers her mouth and makes an exaggerated gasp.

"How many times have I seen you roll a 1 or 2 in sugoroku? I remember once someone made it to the goal and you were still stuck at the start, rolling 1s every time. And whenever you go to stores, they always seem to be closed."

"That's enough… Stop it, Imai." I don't want to hear people making fun of my misfortune.

"But if you think about it the other way, isn't he good at defying the odds? Maybe it's a special skill?" Kougami says. She looks for Imai and Azechi to agree with her.

"Yeah, I'm sure that can be useful somewhere!"

Kougami smiles and raises her fist to cheer me on.

"…That only makes me feel worse."

I try to bite into my chikuwa sandwich, but the chikuwa slips out and lands on the floor. It brought lots of tuna with it. What's the point of a chikuwa sandwich without any chikuwa?

"Ugh…"

I stare at the empty hole it left behind. I can barely hold back my tears any longer.

All I need right now is a friend. At least Kougami didn't abandon me in my time of need. She invited me out for tea at our usual shop for the first time in a long while. Usually all four of us hang out together, and even if Imai isn't around, Azechi is basically joined to Kougami's hip. There's hardly any opportunities for just the two of us to go somewhere nowadays.

"It feels like it's been forever." Kougami smiles shyly. I guess we were thinking the same thing.

"Yeah, it sure does."

It’s fun how chaotic it feels to hang out in our normal group of 4, but I also like how relaxing it is when it’s just the two of us. I don’t know how to describe it, but it feels like we share the same pain and secrets that nobody else understands. But it’s probably Sakurako-san that she wants to meet with, rather than me. I’m sure Kougami only invited me out so she could ask about her.

“…So Sakurako-san still isn’t back yet?“ She mumbles while absentmindedly looking at the posters on the wall.

“Nope. She still hasn’t texted me back, but she’s also the type of person who would only message me if she really needed something.”

It’s definitely concerning that she hasn’t contacted me in so long, but it’s not like she texted me frequently before she left. It could be that she hasn’t said anything simply because she hasn’t needed to. Maybe she’s having a nice time, and nothing particularly pressing has come up. Even if I text her because I’m worried about something, she won’t respond unless she needs to. That’s just how she is.

“What’s wrong? Did you need to talk to me about something?”

“Not really,” Kougami mumbles and shakes her head. “It’s nothing really… It’s just… I saw a strange article in the newspaper.”

“What do you mean by strange?”

She takes out her phone. You’re not allowed to use phones in this store, so she hides it on her lap until she has the article open to show me.

“花開蝶満枝”

“Huh…? What is this?”

“It’s weird, right? It was written anonymously.”

There’s a special insert in the newspaper that comes out twice a week with a buy, sell, and trade section as well as a spot for people to write messages or lessons for others. That grim sentence was written in the “messages for others” section. It’s written between messages like “Thank you to everyone who took care of my mother after she fell in the supermarket. She has been safely discharged from the hospital.” And “Thank you to whoever picked up my keys in the parking lot of XX bookstore.” There’s no mention of when, where, or who wrote it. It’s just that isolated sentence.

“It’s Chinese… right?”

“Yeah. I looked it up, it’s a line from a Chinese poem. It seems to mean that butterflies gather on branches where flowers bloom, but something seems strange about it.”

It’s an old poem called “Feelings.”

“When flowers open, butterflies fill the branches. When the flowers part, the butterflies leave. However, there’s an old swallow’s nest, and though the owner of the land is poor, they return to their nest again.”

…In other words, there’s lots of butterflies on trees with flowers, but you don’t see them on trees as much once the flowers die. However, swallows will return to their nest every year, even if the owner of the land falls on hard times… It sounds to me like the author is comparing people to the nature of butterflies and birds.

“Feelings… And butterflies, huh?”

“I don’t really know why, but when I read this, I thought it might be related to Sakurako-san somehow,” Kougami says with a meek expression.

Just as she said, this message seems very distinct and bizarre. Something unusual sandwiched between the mundane and ordinary. It kind of reminds me of Sakurako-san, somehow. We’re brought back to our senses when our tea arrives.

“I see. Thanks for telling me.”

“What do you think?” Kougami asks anxiously while I hand her phone back to her.

“It’s true that it’s strange, but it might be overthinking it to assume it’s connected to Sakurako-san, right?”

This alone doesn’t tell me anything. I ask her to send me the picture. If this really is a threatening message from Phantom, I don’t want Kougami wrapped up in it. Besides, it might not have any special meaning, anyway. Yeah, like it could be a message aimed at someone else that only they would understand. It’s not good for my heart to worry about everything like this.

As I stare out the window at the sun setting little by little, I think about Sakurako-san. I wonder what colour the sky she’s seeing right now is.

Even so, I can't shake off my anxiety, so I stayed with Kougami until she got on the bus to head home. Due to that, the next bus for me won't come for a while, so I have to walk home. It's a bit far, so it'll take an hour to get there. Fortunately, there's a comfortable breeze. It was chilly at first since the sun had set, but once I got moving, it's a good temperature.

Normally I'd play with my phone while I walk, but since the topic of car accidents is fresh in my mind, I look at the scenery instead. Speaking of which, this curry shop used to be a ramen shop… At first I was hesitant about the changes in the city, but it's not such a bad thing once in a while.

Just then, I hear a car horn behind me. It sounds more like they're trying to get my attention than warn me. It was only a single, short beep. When I turn around, I'm met with an unfamiliar car. A white, compact SUV. They're probably trying to get someone else's attention. I pay them no mind, and continue walking. But the driver seems to be following me. They're going slowly, and staying close to me.

I'm overcome with fear. I just passed a police station a short while ago. I'm near a bookstore and a big supermarket. If I run, it'll be okay. It's not a very busy street, so I need to find a safer place to call my mom or grandpa for help. I'll be fine, I'll be fine… Just before I start running, someone leans out of the car window and calls out, " Tatewaki-kun !"

I spin around so fast that I almost fall over.

"I thought so! It's really you!"

I've heard that voice before. If I take a closer look, I'm sure I'll recognize who it is. Chiseled features, thick eyebrows, tanned skin…

"What? Oh, um…"

I haven't seen him in ages, and it's my first time seeing him in plain clothes, so I still can't put a name to a face yet. It's especially hard to tell because he isn't wearing a hat this time. Even if I don't know exactly who it is at first, I'm so relieved to see a familiar face that I feel like I'm on the verge of collapsing.

"Are you… Yamaji-san?"

He points at the parking lot near the bookstore, and parks there so we can talk properly. It feels kind of awkward, like when I see my brother for the first time in a while.

“You’ve gotten taller since I last saw you.”

“Yeah, it’s been quite a while.”

“You said you’d come to the shrimp festival this year!”

I was happy at first, but I’m upset that he’s already complaining.

“I wanted to go, but Mashike is just too far away.”

I hope I can go sometime, so I can eat as much shrimp as I want. I want to learn to drive as soon as I can.

“I heard there was a lot of damage over there from a typhoon recently. I was pretty worried.”

There’s always a lot of typhoons in Hokkaido around the end of summer, destroying things all over the prefecture. The Ikutora and Sorachigawa districts in Minamifurano City were flooded from the storms. The staff in the town hall actually called each household individually, and visited the ones who didn’t respond to tell them to evacuate. Nobody was hurt, but a lot of people lost their homes.

“Ishikari river was on the verge of overflowing. My friend has relatives that own a farm out in Ikutora. I went over there to help clean up, but the situation was a lot worse than I expected.”

I can imagine the heavy scent of mud. My heart feels heavy from just thinking about all the produce that was destroyed or rotted from the mud. It didn’t just impact Minamifurano, either. 18 rivers overflowed, washing away trees, roads, houses, and even farm animals. I heard that it’ll take 10 years to recover all the damage. Fortunately, the tourist spots will be fixed up soon. On the other hand, that means winter will be tough for people who live in areas that aren’t tourist-heavy.

“Yeah… But I’m glad you seem to be doing well, Tatewaki-kun.” Yamaji-san looks genuinely relieved, but he soon starts to look worried. “But the thing is… I haven’t been able to contact Kujou-san.”

“Yeah… She’s on a long trip right now.”

“A trip? Oh, that makes sense, then. I tried to send her some shrimp, but they were sent back because nobody picked them up.”

“Oh…”

What a catastrophe. Perishable food getting sent back is a modern day tragedy. Gran is basically always around, so he probably thought someone would be there to pick it up.

“I got a phone call about 10 days ago that someone was worried about her, since she’d been gone for so long. I figured she got caught up in another incident or something.”

I was wondering why he was here in the first place.

“Then did you come to Asahikawa because you were worried about Sakurako-san?” He could have at least texted me first.

“No, that’s not the only reason, actually.” He shakes his head.

For a moment, I wonder if he’s going to finish what he was saying. After a moment, he takes a deep breath, like he’s resolving himself.

“Actually… My friend who got married recently said they saw my brother in Asahikawa.”

“…Huh? You mean the one who went missing?”

Yamaji-san’s brother, Youichi Yamaji-san, was following a case about a woman in Hakodate 10 years ago, and suddenly disappeared. Last Christmas, Sakurako-san and I pursued a case where the criminal hid their real identity, but was given the name “rose swallowtail”, a poisonous butterfly, by Hanabusa. I only know about Youichi-san from Shitara-sensei’s files, but he seems to be a righteous person. Perhaps he was chasing the shadow of that toxic butterfly, and fell prey to Hanabusa.

“I thought maybe she was mistaken, but she said she really saw him… She actually dated my brother in the past. But that was a long time ago, and they only went out for 3 months, so… I think she must have been mistaken. For the time being, I’m going to investigate it, though.”

“Well… I hope you find him.”

Saying things like “I’m sure you’ll find him,” or “I’m glad you found a lead” would just make him feel worse. I can tell he doesn’t truly think he’ll be able to find his brother.

“I know a place that serves great jingisukan, so maybe we can grab some and chat sometime.” Yamaji-san tries his best to smile.

I hope he can at least have some fun tonight.

Part 3

When I get home, my mountain grandpa is waiting to greet me.

“Welcome back.”

“Oh boy, something smells good.” The room is filled with the salty-sweet scent of soy sauce. “This must be… pacific saury!”

My grandpa nods. Apparently his younger brother in Kushiro sent some. I head straight to the kitchen so I can see the fish, glistening in a styrofoam bath of ice water. They’re a bit small, but they’re plump and have a nice shade of yellow on the end of their mouths. We’re having some grilled with salt, of course, but my mom is also pressure cooking some with soy sauce. Since they’re nice and fresh, some sashimi would be good, too.

“It’s a saury party tonight.”

I couldn’t go to the shrimp festival, but at least I have this. My grandpa has a charcoal grill set up in the yard to cook the fish with. When the skin gets all crispy and the inside is all fluffy, all it needs is some salt for seasoning. The sashimi is fatty and sweet, and the freshness gives it the perfect texture.

Despite my mom’s scolding, I skip over the vegetables and load up on fish and rice. Since I have some rice leftover, I put ginger, soy sauce, green onions, and broth on it to fill whatever room my stomach has left. After seeing my grandpa off, I collapse on the couch. I bet the scent of grilled saury is still going to linger in the living room by tomorrow. My mom hates the “burning smell,” but I love it.

“This is bliss~” I let my guard down! Hector takes the opportunity to lick my face.

“Good for you. I’m feeling depressed just thinking about tomorrow.”

It’s rare for my mom to open up a can of beer after a meal.

“What happened?”

I want something refreshing after overeating, so I go get some Ribbon Citron from the fridge. We only have Napolin, but I’m still happy with it.

“The incident I mentioned before. The situation seems kind of suspicious. Her ‘sister’ isn’t actually related to the missing woman.”

“Really?”

“They’re close, but they’re just friends, not sisters. The police seem to think that the friend is unrelated, but… Would she really pay someone else’s rent just because they’re close?” Even though she’s gulping the beer down like it’s delicious, my mom has a sour look on her face.

“Maybe they’re just really, really good friends?”

“But it’s still a lot of money, right? Taking on your friend’s rent is too much. I wonder if they’re going to cancel the contract soon. Isn’t it a big responsibility to keep paying rent for someone when you don’t even know if or when they’ll be back? I just think something seems off,” My mom says with a listless gaze.

She’s right, it’s not like it’s just one or two thousand yen. One month would be a different story, but paying someone else’s rent for several months sounds sketchy. My mom is planning to go check on her again. My mom is acquainted with her, since she lives in the apartment building she manages. She’s worried that this woman will ruin her finances by paying all this money, and it would also cause problems for my mom if she suddenly couldn’t pay.

“Are you going to be okay going on your own?”

It’s not like I could really do anything even if I went with her, but I feel strangely anxious about leaving her on her own.

“…Is there some reason I shouldn’t go alone?”

“Not really, but aren’t you worried? I’ll go home right after school. Let’s go together.” I hope nothing ends up happening.

The next day, my mom and I go to visit the apartment. By the corner room on the first floor, pink and purple lupines grow on their own every year, even though nobody planted them in the garden. A woman named Sachiyo Gouro welcomes us apologetically.

“I’m so sorry for having you take time out of your day to meet with me,” she says, bowing her head several times. She looks like she’s around 40 years old, and is quite slender. She invites us inside, but we decline.

“No, no, I should be apologizing for intruding,” my mom says, also bowing her head.

According to my mom, this woman's job is preparing food for bentou boxes. Apparently she even works the night shift so she can afford both apartments worth of rent. She must be exhausted, judging by the bags under her eyes.

"I'll pay the rent for Yua-chan," Gouro-san says.

"Okay… This is hard for me to say, but it would cause trouble for me if you suddenly couldn't pay."

"I understand. In that case, how about I pay 2 months of rent in advance! If you're worried, I can transfer it to you tomorrow."

"Really?"

Gouro-san seems to be very serious about this. My mom glances at me for a moment, then shakes her head. She looks troubled.

"That would be fine for me, but…"

It's a moment of relief for now, but her situation could change in the next 2 months and we'd be right back where we started.

"But… Is it *really* okay with you?" My mom asks.

Gouro-san nods frantically. "Yes. I firmly believe that she'll come back. I can't move her out and dispose of her things without permission."

"Really…?" My mom glances at me like she's asking what I think, but I don't even know what's going on.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. The police are looking for her, so I know she'll be back." She looks really determined. I don't know how to put it nicely, but I don't think she's making a smart decision.

"But… What if she ran away because she's involved in this case? Pardon me for asking, but why are you doing so much for her?" My mom finally cuts to the chase.

"Good point. She's basically a total stranger to me…" Gouro-san's gaze drops to the floor. The entranceway is pretty clean, barring the pair of muddy sneakers. After hesitating for a while, Gouro-san whispers, "I think it's just because I'm lonely."

"You're lonely?"

"Yeah… I don't have a family. My parents passed away a long time ago, and my sister got sick and died a few years ago. I used to be married, but we didn't end up having any children before

separating 4 years ago.” Her voice is quiet, and she looks pretty embarrassed. “I’m ashamed to admit it, but I’m just really lonely. Even though she isn’t here right now, Yua-chan was always straightforward, friendly, and charming. She reminded me of my little sister. And she doesn’t have any relatives to take over her debt, so…”

My mom seems to accept her answer.

“I hope I can always be on her side. I know she’s going through a rough patch, but I want her to be able to live a proper, upstanding life. I’ll wait for her, no matter how long it takes.” Gouro-san looks serious and determined, so I don’t think she’s lying.

“…Alright, I understand now. If you ever have problems making the payments, please contact me in advance.”

My mom decides to give up and leave Gouro-san’s house. I thought that would be the end of it, but my mom has a stern expression on her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hm….? Oh, nothing.” She stops walking, right in the middle of the parking lot. “…It’s just a bit of deja vu,” she mumbles.

“From what?”

“That apartment. The season and location are different, though.” She looks back at the apartment and sighs before opening the car door. I look up at the building, too, and feel the same sense of “deja vu” as my mom did.

“Yeah, I see what you mean.”

This happened during winter, over a year ago. I visited this building with my mom. We found a woman named Kiyomi-san, who had died. Sakurako-san unraveled the mystery behind her death.

“…If she were here, we might be able to get some answers. Oh well, it’s best to leave this to the police.”

“Huh?”

My mom sighs again. I never expected to hear my mom say something like that.

“It’s not like I hate her or anything, I just don’t want you to be in danger. And even though I told you not to see her anymore, you didn’t listen, did you?”

“Mom…”

“If I can’t stop you, it’s better for me to like her than to hate her. Besides, Hector is a real sweetheart.” My mom stretches her arms. “It’s a weird feeling, seeing all these apartments lit up. From the outside, they all look the same, but everyone inside is living a completely different life.”

It was cloudy today, so the sun is already starting to set, and the apartments have their lights on. The only darkened rooms are the empty apartments.

“Brr, the wind is cold tonight.”

You can’t see the sunset very clearly through the grey sky. The chill of the wind shows that summer is passing, and fall is on its way.

“…Is it okay if we have pressure cooked saury with boiled squid and potatoes for dinner?” My mom asks as we climb into the car. She sounds exhausted.

“The leftovers from last night? That’s fine.”

“You don’t sound satisfied. How about I make sweet kakiage, then?”

I wasn’t feeling dissatisfied, but I’m pleased with the kakiage proposal. In my family, our usual “sweet kakiage” consists of sweet potato, pumpkin, and corn fried together. The texture and sweetness are superb. It’s the pinnacle of kakiage. You can dip it in a soup base, but it’s best when you sprinkle salt on top.

“Let’s get going, then.”

“…Yeah.”

I stop for a moment and look back. I feel a gaze on me for a second, like someone is watching me. When I look over my shoulder, nobody is there, and nothing has changed. The breeze blowing past my cheeks gives me a vague, indescribably feeling of anxiety. I hurry into the car.

Part 4

After school the next day, I have plans to meet Yamaji-san in front of the station before he heads back to Mashike.

“So you couldn’t find him?”

“Right. She didn’t chase him, after all. But the way she said ‘it was definitely your brother’ was… It seemed like there was no room

for doubt.” He’s telling me about the results of his search for his older brother while we sit at the counter of the coffee stand.

“I see…”

Even though the jingisukan is good, Yamaji-san’s smile looks miserable.

“…I get it. I know my brother is probably dead.”

“…”

“After all, if he’s alive, why wouldn’t he contact me?”

“Well… Maybe he’s trying not to involve his family in the investigation?”

Yamaji-san nods meekly.

“Or maybe it really is your brother, and Hanabusa used him to get information only a police officer would know. But if he spilled information to Hanabusa, that would make him a traitor… So maybe he quit the police and disappeared because he was ashamed… But maybe that’s too convenient.”

Yamaji-san forces a smile. I force one back. We’re both too scared to say “there’s no way.”

“It’s strange. I’m disappointed that I haven’t found him yet, but I’m also relieved. I want to believe that there’s no conspiracy behind this, he’s just… Out there, living a normal life,” he mutters, looking around at all the Halloween decorations in the store. “He couldn’t stay strong until the end… “

“I hate to say this, but Phantom, Hanabusa, is really out there. If your brother didn’t kill himself, Hanabusa could have had him killed.”

Satsuki-san could have even been involved. His skeleton is out here, somewhere.

“…”

He doesn’t say anything. Which is harder to accept? That there’s an immeasurably evil person out there, or that a loved one committed suicide?

“…It really is strange, though. The first time we met was because of a skull.”

It takes Yamaji-san a minute to remember. Sakurako-san and I found an old skull on the beach in Mashike, leading to us meeting Yamaji-san. Thinking back now, that was the beginning of everything.

“You’re right. That skull didn’t have anything to do with Hanabusa, though.”

“No, but… I think it was kind of a hint.”

I don’t mean it was destiny or anything cliche like that. Maybe I’m just overthinking things again. But what if it wasn’t a coincidence? That day, Sakurako-san and I went to the beach, found the skull, and met Yamaji-san; but what if that was all coordinated by someone else?

“Tatewaki-kun?”

“It’s nothing…”

He looks worried about my sudden silence. I feel silly for even thinking that. I just need to drop it.

“Anyway, let’s change the topic.” I tell him about what happened with the apartment and Gouro-san to take my mind off things. I ask what he thinks, since my mom thought something seemed off.

“I think you should leave it to the police. There’s no need to poke your nose into it.”

“I know, but…” As I expected, he doesn’t think I should get involved.

“Hit and runs are pure evil, but at least the law can protect people from them. Phantom is a special kind of evil that can control and trap others without taking the blame. I’m sure Sakurako-san noticed something about them.”

She always keeps a close eye on the news. She thinks that if she keeps following these incidents, eventually she’ll find Phantom.

“And there’s also this message that caught my eye…” I show him the poem that Kougami found. He looks concerned.

“They must be planning something… Maybe it’s their way of saying they’re coming here.”

“You think Hanabusa is coming to Asahikawa?”

“Or maybe they’re trying to contact someone.”

“That’s…” I’m at a loss for words. There’s a fear that’s been smoldering deep in my chest for a long time. “What if… Hanabusa is in contact with Sakurako-san? I’ve been wondering about that for a while.”

“ Tatewaki-kun ?”

“Sakurako-san is much closer to Hanabusa than I am. I thought maybe she sent this in to try and contact them.” Maybe she chose to see the world through Hanabusa’s perspective, rather than ours.

“I don’t think Kujou-san would ever do something like that. Besides, there’s a good chance it’s a totally unrelated message! If you’re curious, how about you contact the newspaper?” Yamaji-san pats my back encouragingly, but he has no idea. He doesn’t know how dangerous Sakurako-san is.

“Well, I guess so… I thought of that, but…” Anxiety is crawling around inside of me. Every time I feel sure of something, I start doubting myself again.

“Besides, Hanabusa could have already executed the missing criminal.”

Maybe everything has already come to a head, and Phantom is laughing at me for being so far behind. All I can do is hope that Sakurako-san isn’t laughing alongside them.

It’s getting late, so Yamaji-san finishes his coffee and offers to bring me home. Yamaji-san and I aren’t particularly close, we’ve only texted a handful of times, but he saved my life before, so I owe him a lot. Maybe that’s why I feel so sad and lonely when he drops me off. It feels the same as when my older brother moved away. I’m not a kid, so I don’t want him to know that. I have to see him off with a smile.

“Make sure you and Kujou-san come visit before it starts snowing.”

“We sure will.” Pacific saury is all well and good, but I can’t resist the allure of shrimp.

I’d like to spend more time chatting with Yamaji-san next time I see him. He gets into his new Honda SUV and rolls down the window. I thought he was going to say bye one last time, but he stays quiet.

“Yamaji-san?”

“If Hanabusa is really involved in my brother's disappearance… Then it’s likely that they’re both in Asahikawa right now. Be careful out there.” He warns me not to do anything reckless, and to talk to a trusted adult or the police if I’m worried about anything.

“…If anyone seriously gets in Hanabusa’s way, I’m sure they would be killed swiftly. The fact that I’m here right now means I’m not

Hanabusa's target."

Phantom is a ruthless murderer, after all. I'm sure they'll be punished one day.

"What would compel someone to become a serial killer who steals the sphenoid bone from their victims? Are they bestowing some kind of 'justice'? Are they trying to prove something to the world?"

Is it their way of getting back at society, or making a place where they can belong? If Phantom is anything like Sakurako-san, there has to be a reason, and I don't think they're driven by emotions. Is there an actual reason, or is it something more like an agreement? Or are they really being driven by justice? Is Sakurako-san just another specimen for their collection? Am I really in the right? Phantom goes after evil people that the law can't punish, but is that really so bad?

"It isn't justice." Yamaji-san strongly denies the statement that caused my heart to waver. "The one established fact we have is that once you hurt someone, you're no longer righteous. It's just your ego," He says strongly. I quietly nod.

That's right. Hurting others is wrong. Even if there's people who would be better off dead, there's nobody who should die. However, there's another voice whispering in my mind. Could I say the same thing in front of the family of someone who was killed? Just when I think I'm heading in the right direction, that question pops up to haunt me.

However, what's even more frightening is the thought of losing Sakurako-san. Every time I think of Phantom, I start thinking about Sakurako-san. Would she really do something irredeemable for the sake of a bereaved family? I can't help but think about it.

As always, Sakurako-san hasn't messaged me yet. I'm always hoping a text will pop up just saying something casual like "how are you?" I thought about messaging her about the man who disappeared, but I can't fully trust her right now. It might be best if I don't tell her about this case. It can't be helped, I'll just have to investigate the incident on my own.

The criminal was a man named Kazuo Yamaguchi, age 46… That and a rough outline of the case is all I can find online. I wish I could find a bit more to go off of. I decide to call Azechi about it.

“Azechi-san, lord of the internet, won’t you please grant me an audience?”

“Oh? What’s up?”

If she can get me some information, I promise to take her to the Hawaiian pancake shop that Kougami goes to.

“An old hit and run?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t covered on the news a whole lot, so I can’t find much about it.”

“5 years ago, huh…” I can hear her start up her computer and start typing. “Kazuo Yamaguchi… 5 years ago, social media wasn’t as popular as it is now, so don’t expect too much.”

If something like this happened today, both the victim and criminal’s personal information like their name, address, family, workplace, etc. would be all over the internet as soon as it was reported.

“It’s pretty scary, when you think about it…”

“Yeah… It really is.” Azechi sighs, and starts speaking in a frail voice. “You should be careful, Tatewaki. Even if there’s a black bar covering someone’s eyes in the news, anyone who knows them well would still recognize them, and their identity could easily get out.”

“Azechi…”

“If someone wanted to, they could find your location based on the background of a picture you uploaded online, so you should be careful what you post. If someone figured out who you are and where you live, they could easily go after your family and friends.” Her voice sounds shaky, like she’s in some kind of pain.

She would know best, since she’s been tormented by her “digital tattoo” in the past. I want to apologize for making her remember that, but I know she doesn't want an apology from me, so I tell her, “I’ll be careful.”

“Keep that promise, okay? It’s always better to err on the side of caution, since you can never fully remove something from the

internet. You're pretty slow on the uptake, so if you're not sure about something, just ask."

"Then… Should I be careful with who knows my email address?" I remember wondering how Phantom got my email address to contact me in the first place.

"Yeah, try not to reuse the same email address too much. And be extra careful with passwords. You may think it's safer to use Kujou-san's birthday for your password instead of your own, but it's best to use a mixture of numbers and letters."

"Oh… Okay."

She really hit the mark. The password for logging into social media, and to unlock my phone, are both Sakurako-san's birth date. Even though she's been lecturing me about internet safety, Azechi has still been looking up information for me at the same time. She's found a bit of information about Kazuo Yamaguchi.

At the time of the accident, he was working in construction. On the day in question, he was at a co-worker's house in the morning, making yakiniku (which is also when he drank a can of beer). The accident happened when he was heading home at around 6pm. He was scared, so he ran away, but turned himself in at a police box the next morning. To try to calm his nerves, he drank a lot of alcohol at home after the accident.

"He was definitely driving drunk, otherwise he wouldn't have run away," Azechi grumbles.

I agree with her. If he was at a store, the police could check the security cameras and ask other patrons to see how much he drank, but unfortunately he was in a private home. The friends he was drinking with said he wasn't drunk, but there's no proof to confirm that. He didn't meet the requirements for reckless driving, so he was only sentenced to 3.5 years in prison.

"The woman he hit was pregnant with her second child. To think he only got 3 and a half years for killing two people…"

Memories of the woman getting chest compressions, and her pure white skin, cross my mind. It's strange. Even though I've seen countless corpses in much worse conditions, the memory of that woman's pale, lifeless hands remain ingrained in my memory.

“-ening…? Hey, are you listening to me?”

“What?”

“I said that I can’t find anything else about the hit and run, so do you want me to look into the robbery?”

“Oh, yeah, if you can.”

“I don’t think there’d be much information on this one, either.”

Just as we feared, the case didn’t get much attention from the news.

“I don’t know much about the geography of Asahikawa, but… It looks like it happened in an underground pedestrian bridge near the Biei river, when they were crossing from the Midorigaoka side.”

“That means they were going to Kagura. One of my close friends in elementary school used to live there, so I spent a lot of time playing there.”

It’s not too far from the apartment where the Yamaguchi family lives, but also not exactly *close.* Three men and a woman were walking home through the underground pedestrian bridge, when a man attacked them and stole their bags. One of them was beaten unconscious, but has now recovered.

“Apparently he seemed to be familiar with the area, so they suspected that he lived nearby.”

“It looks like someone testified that he was with two young women.”

Maybe that was the “Yua-chan” he was living with. Gouro-san believes in her, but there’s a chance she was robbing people with him. While I’m holding the phone between my ear and shoulder while frantically trying to take notes, Azechi asks me “So how are you going to investigate this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well you’re not thinking of tracking down the criminal on your own, are you?”

“…I dunno.” I give a vague answer since I can’t bring myself to promise that I won’t do that. Having said that, I really wasn’t planning to look for Yamaguchi all on my own.

“…Hey. Tatewaki, do you know how many people die each day in Japan?” Azechi mumbles, abruptly ending the silence.

“Hm?”

“In one day, over 3500 people die. There’s 86 400 seconds in a day, so that’s one person every 24 seconds. While you and I are talking, more and more people are dying.”

Her words feel hot as they echo in my ears. She’s citing factual statistics, but it doesn’t feel real. I can’t find the words to reply. The back of my chair squeaks as I look up at the ceiling.

“A hit and run or a robbery are both horrible things to happen, but the reason I can’t find much about them online is because they’re not rare. Similar incidents and deaths are happening all over Japan all the time.”

“I know, but…”

“You don’t know. That’s how the world is. You’re feeling angry, and thinking that you have to do something. Right now, you should think carefully about if this is something you really have to do.” She adds “By the way, did you finish your math homework? You better not be copying the answers off Yuriko tomorrow.”

Those words sting my ears, bringing me back to reality. She’s right, I haven’t even started my homework yet.

“We can’t change the world. It’s better if you’re a bit apathetic. I don’t know how to tell you this, but if you keep thinking you can make everyone happy, you’ll end up dead one day.”

“I’m not trying to change the world.”

I’m not thinking about anything on such a huge scale. I just want to find the truth behind this one incident. Above all, I can’t just leave a corpse alone.

“It wouldn’t bother me if you died, but I don’t want Yuriko to be sad, so… Anyway, if you went away, there’d only be three of us left. Yuriko and Imai are really close, so I don’t want to be alone again.”

She let her true feelings show in the second half. I know how important Kougami is to Azechi, who once decided she wanted to spend the rest of her life alone. I don’t want to steal her spot.

“After you hang up the phone, just forget about all of this. It won’t do any good for you to poke your nose into it.”

“Yeah… I‘ll do that.”

“I want adzuki cream on my pancakes!” She suddenly ends our call.

I know what Azechi said is true. I decide to tackle my homework for now, but I can’t get that incident out of my head. After about an hour, I get a text from Azechi.

“The news is talking about how Yamaguchi is wanted by the police right now. The police will catch him soon, so I can eat my pancakes tomorrow in peace.”

I rush to turn on the TV and flip through the channels, but I can’t find a news report about it. I look it up on my phone. It’s being covered by the national news, as well as the Hokkaido news channels. We couldn’t find any information about him before, but now the story is spreading like wildfire. They show not only Yamaguchi, but also a woman who saw the accident, and people who criticized the victims of the bag robbery for being careless. I feel like I’m losing my sense of what’s “just” again.

Part 5

A few days pass by without incident. School is the same as always, and nothing in particular happens after school, either. At least the pancakes were good. Yamaguchi’s girlfriend, Yua Irie, is suspected of being an accomplice, but since she can only be considered a suspect for now, the police can’t release her name. Just like Azechi said, these things have a way of getting out. Not only is her name being posted around online, but even the “restaurant” she works at during the night. I heard that people keep visiting the store and causing trouble because of her.

A variety show interviewed some of the people who live in the same apartment building as Yamaguchi, and they claimed he “caused a racket all day and night,” so my mom is worried. There’s an article about how Yamaguchi divorced his wife as soon as he got out of prison, and lived off welfare and pachinko instead of getting a job. He vowed to never drink again during his trial, but several people claim to have seen him drinking as soon as he was let out. He’s being bashed all over the internet now. Strangely, people are only complaining about how they lived off government money instead of

working, and completely ignore the fatal accident and robberies. At any rate, it's only a matter of time until the police catch the two of them.

I wonder if Gouro-san has changed her mind? I ask my mom about it, but she says she tried to call before and couldn't get in touch. Now my mom feels awkward contacting her about the situation. Since it's a matter of money, my mom says she'll try calling again once the situation calms down. But I think something feels off. I obviously don't believe everything I saw online, but I don't see why Gouro-san likes Irie-san so much.

"She's really cute, and reminds me of my little sister," is all she said about it. It must be hard for her to see the way people are talking about her.

"…"

Just the other day, she paid two months worth of rent in advance for "Yua-chan." Why would she go through such lengths for the apartment of someone she hardly knows? The more I think about it, the less I understand. Since the police are working on the case right now, my mom doesn't want to even think about it anymore. Every time I try to bring up the subject, she just says "I don't know," and brushes me off.

I'm getting increasingly irritated and impatient. Days keep passing, and those two still haven't been found. It's Sunday now, and my patience is reaching its limit. After dropping something off at my Nagayama grandpa's house, I'm reading near the bookstore by national route 39 like usual. I suddenly get the urge to talk to Gouro-san directly. This unchanging everyday life stokes my frustration. She might still be at work, or maybe she won't be willing to talk to me. It's fine if that's the case. I just can't stand letting the days pass by without anything happening. I steel my resolve.

As I ride my bike over to her apartment, it begins to rain. There's a coffee shop nearby, so I decide to take shelter from the rain there. I couldn't go home even if I wanted to with this sudden downpour. Fortunately, my weather app says it's a passing shower, and should stop soon. I thought about ordering a cafe au lait, but end up asking for hot chocolate, like Sakurako-san always gets. The sweet cocoa

and steam remind me of her. I let out a sigh. With a warm mug in my hands, I watch the torrential rain run down the window glass.

In the end, I'm just copying Sakurako-san. Sure, she could be enjoying her trip with gran, and not even thinking about it. I hope that's the case. However, a voice deep inside of me keeps whispering "that can't be true." I seriously can't imagine Sakurako-san pulling on gran's hand, fully enjoying going to hot springs and tourist spots. Besides, I can't just not do anything. I want to find some hint about Sakurako-san. I'm not even really thinking about getting involved in the case. Besides, Gouro-san probably won't even be there. Even if she is home, there's no reason for her to welcome a complete stranger like me into her house.

As I worry and slowly drink my hot chocolate, the rain lets up. I fret about whether or not I should turn back after I leave the shop. If right now, Imai or someone texted me, I'd go back home and return to my everyday life. But no one does. I get back on my bike, and head toward Gouro-san's apartment. I circle around a few times to work up the courage to go in, but I feel like I'm just making myself look suspicious. Making my way past the large puddle that has formed in front of the building, I approach the door to her unit. I ring the intercom, but as expected, there's no reply.

"She's at work, I guess."

Honestly, I'm relieved. This is fine. This incident is unrelated to Sakurako-san, Phantom, and I. That's fine. I exhale and look down, only to notice that the shoelace on my sneaker is untied. I'm scared that it could get caught while I'm on my bike, so I crouch down to tie it. As I stand up, my elbow hits the lever handle door knob. I feel a small click, and the door opens.

"Huh?"

It was unlocked. Sure, people who aren't concerned about crime will leave their door unlocked while they're home. Asahikawa is generally safe. Nobody leaves the door unlocked when they go out, though. This city isn't totally free of danger. Of course, there's the possibility that she just forgot to lock it. I softly shut the door again. Once again, I'm overcome with uneasiness.

"…"

Can it really be chalked up to carelessness? Did something happen to Gouro-san? Is it really okay to leave without checking inside? Those thoughts rage in my mind. Regardless of what I think, that'd be trespassing. I'd be a criminal. That wouldn't be good. I don't want to do anything bad, I just want to check if she's really absent, and if she's safe. I'll just take a quick peek. I'll check, then leave right away. I just can't control myself. I put on the nitrile gloves I had in my pocket, and softly place my hand on the door handle again. I open it as gently as possible to try not to make any noise as I enter the room.

It smells like curry and rice. It's probably still lingering from dinner. The entrance is tidy. There's a pair of sneakers by the door. That means she must be home, right? I rush back outside.

"Excuse me, Gouro-san. If you're here, I'd like to talk for a minute." I wait for a moment, but there's no reply. I try asking the same thing from through the open door. There's still no answer, so I slip into the entrance again.

My throat is tight from nervousness. I know I'm overstepping right now. But I can't just turn back after coming here. Azechi's advice echoes in my ears, but I can't stop myself. I hold my breath while I take off my shoes. My first step is muffled by the cat shaped mat by the door, but the flooring in the rest of the apartment is creaky. I'm so focused on the squeaking that I almost forget to breathe.

The apartment is rather modest. There's no unnecessary decorations. My initial impression is that it's clean and orderly. Maybe she's a minimalist. The only "decorations" are a daily calendar on the wall, and a small picture of a flower. It looks like some kind of dianthus, maybe a China pink? Isozaki-sensei told me about them before, but I don't remember much. All I remember is that in the language of flowers, dianthuses mean "pure love," but China pinks mean "I hate you."

"…"

The whole apartment is silent. It doesn't sound like anyone is inside the apartment next door right now. All I can hear is the sound of children playing outside. Behind the living room sofa is an impressive bookshelf. Gouro-san must be an avid reader. There's a book from the library sitting on the coffee table. The bookshelf is

mostly filled with mystery and suspense novels, both from Japan and overseas. There's paperback books on the middle shelf. It draws my attention because there's a gap where 4 or 5 books seem to be missing. Something is worrying me about it, so I lean over the couch to get a closer look.

"Hm…? Gouro-san…?!"

She's lying on the floor between the bookshelf and couch, covered in a pile of books. I can see from the colour of her skin that she's already gone, but I take a deep breath and reach out to her neck anyway. Sure enough, I can't feel a pulse.

"…"

Her skin feels like scotch tape. I reflexively pull my arm back, but my elbow bumps the shelf.

"Ah!"

Less than a second later, the back of my head starts to hurt. Before I even realize what's happening, my vision goes black. I always thought Sakurako-san was the one who embodied "curiosity killed the cat…" I've always been scared that one day, she'll do something reckless again and lose her life, but now I've found myself in the exact situation I was worried about. Why do people always want to know the truth, even if they have to take risks to get it?

The back of my head hurts, and there's ringing in my ears. Everything sounds muffled and far away, like I'm underwater. Despite this, I immediately feel like someone else is here. I don't know if I'm dreaming, but it feels like someone put me on the couch. I want to open my eyes, but my eyelids are so heavy that I can't. I feel a big hand run over my head, then rest over my eyes.

It's okay, it's just a bump. You're not bleeding.

Someone whispers in my ear. I've heard that voice before. I knew you didn't die. You just needed some time.

That gentle, quiet voice speaks to me again. I can feel someone gently stroking my cheek. I manage to reach out to grab their hand, but all I find is thin air. I knew this had to be a dream. I want to open

my eyes so bad, but I just can't. My consciousness starts to fade again.

Part 5

Boy.

The next thing I know, someone is trying to shake me awake.

Boy, wake up. Open your eyes.

Even if they say that, I feel so drowsy. The hand touching my face is bothering me. I reflexively turn my head away, but the hand grabs me and turns my face toward them.

Boy!

Their irritated calling turns into a happy tone.

"I'm so glad," the owner of the voice says. I feel warmth against my forehead. I feel a sigh against my cheek. I'm surprised by the sound of breathing. When I try to sit up suddenly, I feel a rush of pain in my forehead.

"Ouch!" Our small shouts overlap.

"What's with you! Don't get up so suddenly!" The voice says, angrily.

"…Sakurako-san?"

"Geez… Anyway, are you okay?" It's none other than Sakurako-san holding her forehead while looking at me with a stern expression.

Am I dreaming? Has all of this been a dream? Why am I here? I'm confused about everything for a moment, but seeing Sakurako-san pouting in front of me, none of it matters. Before I know it, I'm reaching out my hand to brush the stray hairs off her cheek. Her face is warm.

"…Are you real?"

"Have you ever met a fake me?" She tilts her head with a puzzled expression.

"I guess you're right, but… Are you really, seriously Sakurako-san?"

I can't believe my eyes. She's really here. I reach out again and grab her sleeve. I feel a thin yet strong arm underneath.

"You're not a ghost, huh?"

She shrugs. I'm overjoyed, I want to squeeze her. But I can't. Whenever I try to move, my head hurts.

"Anyway, are you really okay?" Sakurako-san puts her fingers to the back of my head.

"Ow!"

"There's some swelling. You hit your head and got a concussion."

"…Concussion?"

Gradually, I start to get my bearing back. That's right, I was looking for Gouro-san.

"…Why?"

"There's books scattered all over the floor. It's a rather splendid collection, but she didn't organize the books very well. It may look nice, but you shouldn't put such thick books on the top shelf, even if we don't get many big earthquakes in Asahikawa. If it wasn't for that, you wouldn't have that lump of your head." She laughs as she picks up a massive reference book off the floor.

It's about the elements. Beneath it was Gouro-san's body.

"So, why are you here?" Sakurako-san asks, looking down at Gouro-san's corpse.

Shouldn't that be my line?

"What about you, Sakurako-san? Where have you been all this time?"

"Right now I want to know why you were sleeping next to a dead body."

She's right, there's more important things to worry about. I can't help wanting to hear the whole story, though. She looks like she's lost weight in the time I haven't seen her. Her chin is more pointed, and her complexion is a bit worse.

"So you came here on your own? That's pretty brave of you."

"Is that your way of calling me reckless?" We both know she would do the same thing, if she were in my situation. "Why are you here, Sakurako-san?"

“I was curious, so I looked up where Yua Irie worked. I learned that she’d borrowed a lot of money, and the guarantor for her debt was someone named Sachiyo Gouro. That’s also where I got this address. The handwriting all belongs to Irie, so I don’t think this woman knew about the debt.”

Once the police started looking for Yamaguchi, both his and Yua Irie’s personal information was leaked online. The name of the store where Yua Irie worked was blurred out in the article I read, but I could have easily found out if I’d searched a different website. I can’t believe I was right, and Sakurako-san really was investigating a crime.

“Anyway, we should report this to the police. It’s not like we can just leave her here.” Sakurako-san nods while she looks over the corpse.

“This wasn’t… Murder, was it?”

“It could have been an atypical hanging, so I can’t be sure yet.” Sakurako-san heads back to the entrance. I hold my head to dull the pain while I watch her work.

“Where’s your umbrella?”

“Mine…? I didn’t bring one because I took my bike. I just waited it out.”

“So you didn’t bring one…” she mumbles.

“Is that a problem?”

“No. It just looks like someone visited the victim while it was still raining.”

“What?” I muscle through the dizziness so I can join her. She’s staring intently at the floor near the door. “Yeah, there’s shoe prints, but aren’t those just from us?”

The floor in the entrance is made of black tile, so I have to look close to see that it’s wet. Since I came by bike, my shoes only got a bit of water on them from the puddle in front of the building.

“They’re not ours. Look here.” Sakurako-san points at the umbrella stand.

“There’s… A wet umbrella?” One of the umbrellas still has drops of water stuck to it.

“And these runners are wet, too. It was raining… About 3 hours ago,” she says, checking her watch. That means I was knocked out for almost 2 hours.

“The rain only lasted about 30 minutes. It didn’t rain at any other point today, so it wasn’t wet from earlier in the day. The empty spot next to this umbrella is wet, too.”

I crouch down, and sure enough, there’s water in both spots of the umbrella stand, as well as the shoe shelf next to it. There’s no doubt that there was another wet umbrella here at some point. Sakurako-san walks back to where Gouro-san is and gently inspects the nape of her neck.

“Look here, there’s blisters from a rope on her throat. The fact that her body reacted to it means that the rope must have been on her while she was still alive, rather than after in an attempt to disguise her death as suicide… Based on the stillness of her jaw, I’d say it’s been around 2 or 3 hours since she died.”

“Then…” She must have died just before I got here. A chill runs down my spine. “Then I probably passed right by Yamaguchi and Irie?”

“That’s right… They could have even been hiding in this room when you came in. Maybe it wasn’t a book that knocked you out, but the criminal trying to get rid of you.”

“No way…”

“Anyway, we’d better report this. You should call Utsumi.”

There’s no way I can call the police here without someone I know, considering the situation. I phone Utsumi and explain what happened. I tell him that I heard that the police were looking for Yamaguchi, so I was worried about Gouro-san. I found her door open when I went to check on her. I peeked inside because it didn’t sit right with me, and fainted after knocking down some books in surprise.

It’s not a lie. It’s almost entirely true. It’s just a few minor details. I tell Utsumi-san that Sakurako-san came to pick me up and found me passed out. After giving my story to the police, they call my mom to come get me.

“What are you doing here?!” My mom scolds me as soon as she sees me. I tell her that it’s because I was just in the area, but she

doesn't look convinced at all. "I didn't know you'd started playing detective with her again."

"I haven't been, I just met her by chance."

"That's enough! Stop poking your nose into other peoples' business! What if people start thinking you killed her?!"

It's a good thing I was at the cafe at the time she was actually killed, so I have an alibi. I can't say that I'm not worried about being a suspect, but there's no motive for me to kill her in the first place. It's definitely been one heck of a day, though. I never thought that I'd meet Sakurako-san again just from visiting Gouro-san.

"…Well, she lived alone, so it's a good thing you discovered her early. It's hard enough that I have two vacant rooms now, so I'm glad I don't have to renovate them," my mom says as she lets out a huge sigh.

"Two vacant rooms at once?"

"Yeah, that's right. I was contacted by the police a little while ago. They found Irie-san's body."

"Hoh?" Just as we finish talking with Utsumi-san, Sakurako-san joins the conversation. She sounds surprised.

"She died in a fire at an abandoned house. They were saying it was probably a suicide… Do you think she was actually keeping in touch with those two behind my back?"

"She was at an abandoned house?"

My mom finishes her explanation. The building that Yamaguchi and Irie-san committed suicide in was Hanabusa's atelier. The same house as Hitoe-san and the others' sanctuary, as well as where I went during the group suicide incident several months ago.

The police concluded that the two of them knew they were wanted by the police, so they committed a double suicide. Gouro-san's death was also ruled a suicide. They didn't find any evidence that it was a murder. She seems to have hanged herself from a hook on the side of the bookshelf. It's true that there's evidence that she met someone before committing suicide, but there's no signs of violence or struggle. Five books had fallen.

My concussion may have been caused by a strike from the criminal who was hiding… That's what Sakurako-san thinks. I suppose it is strange, since I passed out right on the couch. There's always the possibility that I just happened to fall directly onto it, of course. However, when I was half awake, I felt someone carrying me. It couldn't have been Yamaguchi, though. He had died the previous evening. In that case, the possibility that it was Phantom comes to mind.

-That's right, I won't kill you yet. It takes a lot of food and energy to grow wings.

A chill runs down my spine. It could have just been a nightmare.

"Do you… Think Phantom was involved in this case?"

"I was following this incident with that in mind. I didn't notice any signs of him though, and nobody involved had their skull tampered with." It's been three days since the incident, and Sakurako-san and I are meeting at our usual tea shop. She refutes my groundless worry. Something seems off somehow, though.

"Anyway, where have you been all this time? You still haven't picked up Hector, either."

Apparently Sakurako-san can't go home for a little longer still, so Hector will keep being part of the Tatewaki family for the rest of the month. Well, it's not a bad thing on its own, but why do we have to meet at the tea shop instead of her house today, for example?

"…Is Gran doing well?"

"Yeah, Ume is the same as always. She's in Sapporo today."

I wonder if she's visiting Sakurako-san's uncle who's in the hospital.

"Did something happen to Shitara-sensei?"

"Nothing major. You don't need to worry about it."

"I see…"

Sakurako-san slowly shakes her head. I wish she could tell me what's wrong… But when it comes to her uncle, Sakurako-san doesn't seem to want anyone else involved, so I have no choice but to accept it. Besides, even if I ask, she won't tell me anything. I'm relieved that she didn't leave to get away from me, though.

“Oh yeah, what happened with Gouro-san?” I decide to change the subject before things get awkward.

“Gouro-san’s family and ex-husband refused to deal with her corpse and belongings.”

Irie-san’s family dealt with her stuff even though she severed ties to them, but Yamaguchi and Gouro-san’s families both refused. The apartment where Yamaguchi and Irie-san lived was absolutely trashed, but Irie-san’s family offered to pay the cleaning cost. Gouro-san’s relatives asked my mom to sell her furniture and use the money to have her body cremated. My mom said that she didn’t feel right about it, but she didn’t have much of a choice. It seemed hard for her to do it. I feel bad for Gouro-san. A woman not much older than me lived and died alone, and her family doesn’t want anything to do with her even after she died.

“We’re not going to have a proper funeral or wake, but we’re going to see her off when her body gets sent to the crematorium tomorrow. If you have time, do you want to come too?” I know Sakurako-san probably doesn’t care, but I’d like to have as many people there to say goodbye to her as I can. It’s the least she could do, considering she touched Gouro-san’s corpse.

The next day, I go to see the body being taken away. Apparently Gouro-san didn’t have any close friends at work, but the company she worked for sent some incense. She must have been lonely. Her contacts list in her phone only had one co-worker, one distant relative, and her ex-husband in it. I wonder why? She didn’t seem like a bad person. When I ask my mom about it, she says, “you get as much as you put in. If you don’t put effort into forming and maintaining friendships, they’ll eventually fall apart.” So why would she choose “Yua Irie” as her only friend? Was it really because she resembled her sister?

In the end, only Sakurako-san, my mom, and I come to see Gouro-san off. All that’s left is to listen to the monk chant, then cremate the body. I’m glad there wasn’t a huge crowd, but it’s depressing how nobody came to say goodbye to her.

“She liked prairie gentians. I’m glad they were in season.”

Usually you see white chrysanthemums or lilies in caskets, but this casket is full of small, colourful flowers that look a bit like roses.

“They’re beautiful flowers that last a long time after they’re cut,” my mom replies to the funeral director, Kobamatsu-san .

“You’re right. Apparently she didn’t like fragrant flowers. She didn’t think showy things suited her… She was a rather reserved person,” Kobamatsu-san says, wiping his eyes.

I’ve been here before, so I'm surprised to see a different person in charge this time.

“Actually… Gouro-san was an acquaintance of mine.”

Kobamatsu-san is slender, and has fine, light hair. Perhaps it’s because of his glasses, but he gives off the impression that he’s an anxious, yet mild-mannered man. He speaks in a low, quiet voice, probably because of his profession. He really seems like someone Gouro-san would be friends with.

“My flip phone broke recently, so I had to switch to a smartphone. My contact list is empty now. I wish I’d called her a little more often.” Kobamatsu-san tells me about how he doesn’t have a single friend anymore. He even fell out of contact with his classmates from when he was in school.

In addition to the usual notice of passing, Hokkaido newspapers typically include the name of the deceased person, and location of where the funeral service is held at. Hokkaido is a big place, so this way even distant relatives can see if someone has passed. The notice is made free of charge based on the death certificate, but due to changing views on personal information, people have the choice of whether they want one made or not. My mom wanted to have one made, since a notice would be made after the funeral anyway, but Gouro-san’s ex-husband was strongly opposed to it. I imagine it’s because he just got remarried and doesn’t want his ex-wife’s name coming up again, but I think it’s sad for her to pass away without leaving her name behind.

All I can do for her is be here for this one, fleeting moment. The four of us listen to the sutras, burn some incense, and watch her casket get taken away. We don’t have a reason to keep her ashes, so there’s nothing else to do but go home… It’s hard to bring ourselves

to leave, so we stay with Kobamatsu-san for a little longer. When I turn to look at Kobamatsu-san , he looks haggard.

“I’m glad she had someone she was close to here,” my mom says while she drinks tea in the waiting room.

“We weren’t that close, I’d only known her for a little while…”

I think that only knowing each other for a short time means it was even harder to lose her. Kobamatsu-san isn’t wearing a wedding ring, so maybe he was after more than friendship with her. I can’t tell how old he is, especially when he’s losing his hair, but he doesn’t look much older than Gouro-san. On the other hand, it’s hard to imagine two serious people like them smiling and chatting the day away.

“Did you visit her apartment shortly before she died, by any chance?” I remember the missing umbrella from the apartment.

“No, why do you ask?” He looks confused.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I just noticed that it seemed like someone else had been there when I discovered her body. I was worried that Yamaguchi or Irie-san had been there, but apparently they died before Gouro-san.” I thought it was a pretty casual thing to ask, but Kobamatsu-san’s face is pale, and he looks shocked.

“Does anything come to mind?” Sakurako-san asks. She sits up straight and crosses her legs.

“…N-no…” Kobamatsu-san shakes his head. He’s trembling so much, I can tell he’s hiding something.

“Well, we should be going now. Please excuse us,” my mom says, preventing me from asking more questions.

I don’t know if it’s because she feels bad for him, or if she thinks we’re bothering him. Sakurako-san leaves first. She isn’t interested in collecting the ashes. My mom scolds Sakurako-san, saying “I don’t even know why you came here!” and “You could at least try to have a bit of common sense.”

Part 7

After seeing off Gouro-san, I think everything is pretty much wrapped up. Sure, there’s still the question of why Gouro-san died, why Yamaguchi chose to die in *that* place, why someone was at Gouro-san’s apartment just before she died, and Kobamatsu-san’s

odd behaviour… All those questions poke at me like thorns, but I'm not really related to this case anymore. I should try to have a bit of common sense, too. My mom and Azechi have both told me that. Maybe I'm more short-sighted and reckless than I think. Although it turned out alright in the end, entering Gouro-san's apartment was going too far.

I got a CT scan right away since the police recommended it, but it didn't show anything important. The lump on my head still hurts, though. It feels like I'm being punished. As I'm reflecting on my actions during the evening, the home phone rings.

"Did you forget something at the crematorium today? Kobamatsu-san just called." My mom comes into the entrance holding the phone while I'm giving Hector his post-walk brushing.

"Forget something?"

"Yeah. He thought it probably wasn't yours, but wanted to make sure." My mom goes back to the living room after handing me the phone, mumbling something about "such an honest person." She wasn't happy about being interrupted in the middle of her favourite TV show.

"Hello?" I don't think I forgot anything, but maybe Sakurako-san did? I was expecting him to start talking right away, but all I hear is silence. "Um… Hello…?"

"…Her death." His voice is muffled and nearly unintelligible.

"What?"

"I want you to tell me everything that you can about her death. I want as much detail as possible." He's speaking a lot more clearly this time.

"Oh… I see."

"I'm sure you don't want to remember that, so I'm truly sorry for bothering you, but please tell me everything you know."

It's true that I don't feel *good* when I talk about the dead and how they died. Any ordinary high school student would be shaking in their boots after seeing a dead body like that. I'm sure he knows that well, considering he works with the dead. I just can't say no when he's begging me so politely and earnestly.

"It's not a bother. I don't know much, but I'll tell you what I can."

For better or worse, I'm already used to corpses. I still get grossed out by decomposing bodies, but I can still face them head on. I promise to meet Kobamatsu-san tomorrow, and hang up the phone.

"Did you forget something?" My mom asks when I go to put the phone back.

"Sakurako-san did," I reply.

"Oh, okay."

I'm relieved to see her go back to watching TV without asking anything else. I'm not confident I'd be able to lie convincingly if she'd asked what Sakurako-san forgot or something. Thank you, hot actors. When I tell Sakurako-san about the phone call, she says that she'll come with me. It's a good thing neither of us have plans.

Kobamatsu-san said he might have to cancel if there's a sudden appointment, but fortunately he shows up on time. I wanted to meet at my usual coffee shop, but it's full today, so we have to make do with a coffee stand near my house. It's the same place I went to wait out the rain on the day Gouro-san died. The stand is crowded, so there aren't many seats left. Even though we hadn't discussed where to sit beforehand, Kobamatsu-san is sitting in the exact same seat that I used on that day. It scared me a bit.

Sakurako-san arrives last. She orders hot chocolate and a pumpkin tart, while I have a cafe latte with an extra shot of espresso. I wanted to order something cooler than normal. The milk isn't very sweet, but it's still good. Plus it looks cool. Sakurako-san doesn't worry about if she looks cool, so she can order whatever she wants without hesitation.

"You must have a sweet tooth." Kobamatsu-san's expression softens a bit when he sees Sakurako-san break out into a smile at the sight of her tart. I'm sure this is nerve wracking for him.

I'm reluctant to tell him all the details about what happened to Gouro-san, but he keeps insisting on hearing everything. I ready myself, then delve into all the specifics of her corpse. Since he's used to being around the dead, his expression doesn't change the whole time we're talking. Sakurako-san adds details to my story as I go along, like the blisters on her neck and the wet floor.

“There were signs of incontinence after death, so I don’t think her body was moved. There were no signs of a major fight with someone else, and she didn’t have any skin or blood under her fingernails. It didn’t look like any of her hair, or the collar of her shirt, got caught under the rope that was used to strangle her. I disagree with how the police ruled this a suicide.”

Usually when people hang themselves, they end up getting their hair or clothes caught under the rope. It’s one of the clues as to whether a particular case was a suicide or a murder.

“I see…” Kobamatsu-san nods and takes a deep breath. “But I don’t think her death was planned. It was probably the spur of the moment.” Kobamatsu-san lifts his head upon hearing those words. “There was still food left in a pot in the kitchen, and an unreturned book from the library on her table… Most women wouldn’t leave things undone if she was planning to kill herself. Especially since her room was kept very clean and organized. Her tableware and books were all organized, and she seemed to keep on top of changing her calendar.”

I remember seeing the daily pad calendar in her living room. It’s not uncommon for my mom to forget about changing the date on it a few times each month.

“That’s why I think something must have happened on that day that upset her so much that she chose suicide as her only option.”

“Something that happened…” Kobamatsu-san clenches a fist against his chest as if it hurts while he speaks. Right over his heart.

“Well, the obvious conclusion would be that she was upset by something said by the person who visited just before her death.”

“Is that so? Maybe that person was trying to stop her?”

“If that were the case, they wouldn’t have left her alone. There wasn’t a single drop of water in the kitchen. Normally you’d serve tea to your guests, right?”

“Maybe they were in a rush.”

Kobamatsu-san, who has been silently listening to our exchange, puts up his hand and asks us to stop. “It’s fine, I understand.”

“What do you understand? The reason she chose to die? Is it because you are the reason?” Sakurako-san’s rude question startles me.

Kobamatsu-san shakes his head. “It wasn’t because of me, but I have a feeling I know the reason.”

“In that case, who was the last person she met with?“

He doesn’t answer the question. He just makes a stiff expression.

“I can tell by the look on your face,” Sakurako-san says. “But that’s strange,” she mutters.

“Boy. What do you think the reason for her death was?”

“Huh? Oh, me? Let’s see…” I’m caught off guard by having the conversation suddenly turned over to me. Sakurako-san clicks her tongue. “I think her death was related to the disappearance of Irie-san. So I thought Irie-san was the person she met before commiting suicide, but that couldn’t happen, based on the autopsy results… So she probably committed suicide out of loneliness?”

“Then what about the timing? At the time she died, Irie and Yamaguchi’s deaths hadn’t been reported yet. If she committed suicide because of their deaths, she would have had to know about it before the police did.”

“Oh…” I answered in a panic, and got shot down in the blink of an eye. But what other reason could it be? I wasn’t close enough to Gouro-san to figure it out.

“Of course, this whole train of thought could be wildly incorrect, but I think we’re on the right track. She knew where Yamaguchi and Irie were hiding. She was also a disgusting criminal, and Yamaguchi’s accomplice. She killed Yamaguchi and his other accomplice, then herself to-“

“There’s no way!” Kobamatsu-san shouts, and slams both his hands against the table. The impact shakes Sakurako-san’s tart dish, making her fork fall to the floor. Sakurako-san shrugs.

“Really? How are you so sure?”

“I know she wasn’t that kind of woman,” Kobamatsu-san replies clearly. Sakurako-san scoffs at him.

“Do you have proof? Is it because she was close to Yua Irie?”

“…” Kobamatsu-san clenches his molars, unable to tolerate his irritation.

“Sakurako-san, please don’t speak that way about the dead. No matter what the circumstances may have been, this is going too far. I don’t think Gouro-san was a bad person, either.” I hurriedly step in to stop them. Sakurako-san snorts and pouts.

“But she was lying, wasn’t she? That’s what you thought, so you went to visit her house again. She must have said or done something that felt off.”

“Well… I guess you could say that.”

While Kobamatsu-san is at a loss for words and unable to deny it, Sakurako-san puts her arm around my shoulders and pulls me toward her.

“What do you think, Kobamatsu? Do you think I’m the one bothering you? It’s actually this kid’s fault. He loves playing detective, and can’t stop until he knows the truth.”

My face turns red out of surprise. Sakurako-san pokes my cheek. She puts her head against my temple. I can feel my ears burning.

“I can’t help it, this kid’s just so cute. I feel like I have to do whatever he wants to do. We might even find out why Sachiyo Gouro died. I’m sure it would be easier for you if you just told us before we raid her grave.” She suddenly lets go of me, then grabs the fork that fell. She asks me to go get a new one.

“I’ll go instead,” Kobamatsu-san says with a pale face. He takes the fork and heads toward the register. His legs are shaking.

“…You used me.” I say once Kobamatsu-san has turned his back.

“Ever heard of ‘good cop, bad cop’? I was just playing the villain.”

“That’s only because you were mad that he wasn’t telling you the truth.”

‘Good cop, bad cop’ is a psychological technique used in police interrogations. One officer will act nice, while the other is rude and aggressive. I think it originated in England. You see it a lot in movies and TV shows.

Sakurako-san smiles instead of replying to me. She looks happy, and touched. I think she's happy that she has someone who understands her so well.

"…Hey, Sakurako-san…"

I want to know. I'm feeling anxious. I'm worried that I hurt or bothered her with what I said to her in front of the station before. Not long after, she left me. I feel awkward bringing it up, but I should really ask her about her uncle's condition. I know it's hard for her, but it's good to talk about it with someone. She must be worried that he's less stable than she thought. Once her uncle and gran are gone, she'll need rules to follow so she can fit in with the rest of society. I want to confront her properly now. As of now, she's as dangerous as someone walking around holding a knife.

"Thank you for waiting."

Just as I strengthen my resolve, Kobamatsu-san returns. He places the new fork on the table. Sakurako-san nods, then uses it to take a big scoop of her tart.

"So then—"

"I'll tell you." As soon as Sakurako-san starts to speak with her mouth still full of food, Kobamatsu-san puts his hand up to stop her. The colour has returned to his face, and he looks prepared.

"I'll tell you. It's definitely better for you to hear it from me, but… Can you swear that you won't tell the police? This has to stay a secret."

"Well…"

"That won't be a problem. Even if you admit to a crime, it's the police's fault for not catching you. I'm not interested in the law. The kid will stay quiet if I remind him, too."

I was going to say "it depends on the situation," but Sakurako-san cuts me off. She gives me a mysterious look, and nods. I feel guilty.

"…Maybe I actually wanted someone to ask me, all this time," Kobamatsu-san says as we leave the cafe and head toward the Kagura district.

It reminds me of when we first met. The road heading to Midorigaoka is like a tunnel made of plane trees. The car stops in

front of an old house near Nishimidorigaoka.

“This is my parents’ house. My father passed 4 years ago, and my mother last year, so nobody actually lives here right now,” Kobamatsu-san says while he gets out of the car.

As the name suggests, Midorigaoka has a lot of greenery. (TL note: Midori = green) I can hear carrion crows cawing nearby.

“It’s not dangerous, so please head inside,” Kobamatsu-san says after unlocking the door.

Sakurako-san and I look at each other in confusion, but he urges us to go inside. His parents probably built this house a long time ago. It’s a white, one story house with a triangular roof. The outer walls are starting to look damaged. The inside of the house smells musty and old. As a whole, the house looks well maintained.

“Thank you for having us.”

“It’s hard for me to get rid of the house, so I’m thinking of renovating it and renting it out.”

If nobody is living here, why is there still power? Kobamatsu-san takes a bottle of mineral water out of the fridge. It looks like the problem is that he hasn’t gotten rid of all the old stuff, rather than a lack of cleaning. I notice a lot of stuff is similar to what my grandma used to have, like the old, red cola cups.

“You didn’t bring us here to drink water, did you?”

I sit on the couch while Sakurako-san looks around the room. I already had something to drink at the cafe, plus it’s too cold in here for me to want cold water. The curtains are thick and pulled closed, so it’s pretty chilly in here. Kobamatsu-san forces a smile. I pour some water into my cup, even though I don’t want any, just to be polite.

“Let’s sit down and talk,” I say to Sakurako-san.

“I’m listening, don’t worry about me,” she says while she starts searching the rest of the house.

“Don’t worry…?”

It’s hard to pretend like she isn’t snooping around the whole house. It doesn’t feel like the right atmosphere for Kobamatsu-san to open up to us. I apologize for her behaviour, but he smiles and

shakes his head. When Sakurako-san walks by me, I grab her arm and make her sit with us.

"…" She brushes off my hand, then sits on the couch with a dissatisfied expression.

"So?"

The couch is a little springy. The room smells like a stranger. It's not very comfortable here. While suppressing my urge to leave and go straight home, I wait for Kobamatsu-san to start talking. He gazes at Sakurako-san and I for a moment. Then, with a bitter smile, he slowly starts to tell us his story.

Hiroshi Kobamatsu's Confession.

On that day, Hiroshi Kobamatsu was visiting his parents' house to clean. He had spent the morning cleaning his father's study, but there was still no end in sight. In addition to a multitude of old letters and documents, he found three plastic models in the closet that had not been assembled yet and were still in their cardboard boxes. It's likely that his father had been keeping the collection a secret from his mother. They were in good condition. Hiroshi Kobamatsu thought it was a bit unusual that the models were of ships and submarines. He wondered if they were valuable. After excitedly searching online, he found that they weren't worth anything. Putting them up for auction would be more effort than it was worth. He was disappointed by this. After being interrupted, he had lost his concentration.

He checked his watch, and saw it was after 6:00pm. He was tired and hungry, so he went to a hot spring resort along national route 237 for dinner. He noted that three hours had passed. He took a bath after eating, but he was feeling a bit dizzy from the heat. He wanted to drink a beer, but unfortunately, he had gone there by car. He mentioned that he had a dog at his parents' house who he'd often walk to the Bieigawa floodplain or Kitamidorigaoka. He wasn't close with the dog, Muku, since his parents had gotten it after he had moved out. He thought the dog wasn't getting enough exercise, though, so he sometimes took the dog for walks. Muku is gone now, so Hiroshi Kobamatsu feels like he's not getting enough exercise lately.

He parked his car by the floodplain, and headed toward Kitamidorigaoka. It felt nice, since it was almost 10:00pm and there was almost nobody else around. Just the city lights, sound of water, singing of insects, and the wind gently blowing by his face. His only worry was about mosquitos. Upon his return, the items he'd inherited would be waiting for him. What would he do with his father's plastic models? He couldn't bring himself to just throw them away, so maybe there was somewhere he could sell them… His thoughts steadily flowed as he listened to the sound of his footsteps, until he heard a woman scream in the distance.

In an instant, his mind started to race, wondering if someone was being molested, or if there was a robbery. He wasn't sure if he should get involved, but he couldn't just ignore someone in need of help. However, he wasn't confident in his strength. What would he even do when he got there?Still, he couldn't just pretend nothing happened. He decided to at least check nearby, and contact the police. Kobamatsu held his breath, and quietly approached the scene.

The owner of the voice was too far away from the lights to see. After approaching a few meters, he could finally see a shadowy figure. He continued to hold his breath while he observed. There appeared to be several people gathered on the street. At first, he thought it was a group of young people fighting. They were all breathing heavily, but not speaking. It was a whole group of people tangled together in the dark.

"Wait! Don't run! Let me explain!"

A woman with a small build says with the same voice as the scream he's heard before. She stands stock still in the middle of the bizarre atmosphere. He felt the instinct to pretend he didn't hear anything and escape whispering to him, but he couldn't get away. Someone had lunged toward him, and was clinging to his arm. It turned out that the person who had grabbed him was a gaudy woman.

"W-what are you doing?!" Kobamatsu-san was worried she was going to attack him at first, but he was relieved when she told him to call the police.

Looking down at the woman, illuminated by the dim light, she looked around the same age as Kobamatsu. She was short and slender, like a willow tree. Kobamatsu felt himself become overwhelmed by the urge to protect her. The woman, who somehow seemed helpless like a young girl, made Kobamatsu forget the situation he was in for a moment.

“Please! Hurry!”

“R-r-right!” In his haste to take his phone out of his pocket, he dropped it.

“Ah!”

It clattered as it hit the ground.

As he went to pick up his phone, another woman materialized in the darkness. She looked to be in her early twenties.

“Please, let me explain! We didn’t do anything wrong!” She pleaded to Kobamatsu and the woman in his arms.

“But you guys attacked and tried to kidnap someone!”

“Those two are the ones who are in the wrong! They’ve been robbing people all around the neighbourhood, and that man-“ The small woman held up her hands to calm the frantic, younger woman.

“I get it. You mean the guy from the hit and run, right? Kazuo Yamaguchi and Yua Irie.”

“Huh…? You know them?” The younger woman was surprised by the small woman’s words.

“Yeah, she’s my friend. She’s been acting weird lately, so… I thought I’d follow her.”

The woman in his arms no longer seemed afraid, and spoke in a firm voice. She picked up Kobamatsu’s phone.

“A… Anyway, please don’t report this yet. Otherwise the police will arrest me, and that man will do the same thing again!” The younger woman grabs the smaller woman’s wrist to stop her from making a phone call.

Kazuo Yamaguchi. He didn’t expect to hear that name at a time like that.

“Right… He hasn’t even apologized to the family of the woman he killed.”

Kobamatsu stood still, dumbfounded by the name he'd just heard.

"The family? …Could it be… Did you know Takahashi-san?"

The shadowy figure from before approached Kobamatsu and the others. He appeared to be a rugged, burly young man. Kobamatsu was wary of him.

"I didn't know Takahashi-san, but I took care of her at my job." When he revealed that he worked at a funeral home, the man and women looked at each other. "I still remember Norie Takahashi-san's funeral. Her husband, Kimiaki-san was made the chief mourner. He looked haggard. Her parents were doing their best to care for her child."

Kobamatsu paused to remember that day. Funerals are always sad, no matter what. People will still cry at a funeral, even if the deceased was a bad person, or if they died peacefully in their sleep. Still, that funeral was one of the most unforgettable funerals Kobamatsu had been part of.

"Was his name Shuuto-kun? He's a quiet, intelligent boy. I was glad that he had a lot of friends and relatives say goodbye to his mom, but it was enough to make me cry during the cremation. Everyone looked crushed when he started crying for his mom…"

"Yeah, Shuuto-kun is a smart boy." The man looked disgusted.

"This man is the one who ruined his life. We can't just leave him be, so we trapped him, but… What do we do now? We can't take him to the police after we just attacked him."

"Well…" The man lowered his head.

"…You wouldn't..." Terrible thoughts crossed Kobamatsu's mind. The rugged man shakes his head in a panic.

"We wouldn't do that! We wouldn't kill him just for robbing people! I just want to convince him not to commit any more crimes."

"Convince him? How?"

"…Anyway, we don't intend to hurt them. Just forget about it." The man turned to Kobamatsu and said, "neither of us saw anything. Just go home and pretend this never happened."

It was a tempting offer, but Kobamatsu dares to say, "I will if you explain yourself." He didn't want to make things worse, but he wasn't

confident in his ability to act normal.

“If I tell you, will you promise not to report me?” The man asked quietly, shooting a glare at Kobamatsu.

“That depends on if it’s the right thing to do.” The man looked up at the sky with a grim expression. He seemed worried.

“…We’ll keep them locked up for a while, and give them regular punishments. I’ll make them reflect on what they’ve done so they never commit another crime,” the young woman revealed, unable to just watch.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Otherwise, I’m sure someone will die again. That’s just the kind of man he is,” The young woman says. The small woman nods in agreement with her.

“Where are you going to keep them?”

“I don’t need to tell you that.” The man crouched on the ground and spoke in a sharp tone to stop his questions. He had already said too much. He was holding a syringe in his hand.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I might know a better place.” Kobamatsu held his ground, even though he didn’t know why he said that. “My parents’ house is nearby. My parents are gone already. My mother liked karaoke, so they built a soundproof room so she wouldn’t bother the neighbours. The room has no windows, and it locks from the outside, so he can’t escape,” Kobamatsu continued. The other three look at each other. “What do you think? Want to use it? Or did you have a safer place in mind?”

“…We're going to keep him in a one bedroom, members only apartment. The soundproofing there is solid,” the man with the syringe eventually said, being careful not to give away too much detail.

“Is there a security camera at the entrance?”

“There’s only one at the front door.”

“What floor? What about other people seeing? Are you sure you can get him there without being caught?”

“…” The man with the syringe didn’t reply.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is… I also… want to cooperate with you. You can feel free to use my house if you’d like.” Those

strange, distant words spoken in such a casual tone seemed so detached that Kobamatsu didn't even feel like he was the one that said them. Naturally, the others gave Kobamatsu a troubled look.

"I'll help, too. I don't think what they did is right, they need to be punished," the smaller woman said with a grim expression.

"But you're acquainted with her…"

"It's not like we're friends. Quite the opposite, actually. She's caused me a lot of trouble, so I don't care what happens to her."

A taxi passed through the side street they were on. Maybe taxis took detours down that road.

"Anyway, we have to hurry, or someone will show up eventually!" The younger woman said after coming to her senses.

"I worked so hard to plan this, but now it's all messed up!" The man with the syringe puts his hands on his head and yells up at the sky.

"Maybe this is for the best. As long as we can all trust each other, it's better to have more people to keep watch over them." The rugged man said. The man with the syringe nods.

"…Maybe this is fate… Please take us there. It'd be better to lock them up before they wake up."

The man with the syringe (who seemed to be the leader) gave Kobamatsu orders. Kobamatsu was confused, but relieved. He was probably relieved because of the small woman sitting in the passenger seat of the car. Despite the situation they were in, Kobamatsu didn't want to leave the woman. He felt like they were fated to meet. It was love at first sight.

The two cars arrived at Kobamatsu's house. The women were in charge of watching Yamaguchi and Yua Irie, who were tied up and still unconscious. The men prepared their cell. The room was originally a karaoke room for his late mother, but had now been renovated into a tatami room. The room had 7 tatami mats of floor space, with high quality soundproofing so that the neighbours wouldn't complain. They put two pipe beds, each with a futon and a blanket, and a portable toilet for their captives to use. They also put two security cameras in the room, with hooks to hold the cords up.

The leader decided what needed to be included and prepared the furniture, while the rugged man and Kobamatsu installed everything.

“Is this really okay?” The rugged man asked Kobamatsu while he installed the lock with an electric drill.

“Yeah, I’ll clean everything up when I remodel it, so feel free to use it however you want.”

“But… don’t you want to at least keep it clean?” He glanced at the portable toilet.

“I know a special cleaning company through my job. If it’s too terrible, I can ask them to clean it after.”

Apart from that… Kobamatsu felt good about it. He was working on something thrilling rather than needing to process his grief, or sort through plastic models and documents. Even if it was almost- no, it was probably already a crime. But if the criminal can’t be punished by the law, they had to take it into their own hands.

-The culprit never apologized.

Kobamatsu stills sees the image of the victim’s mother crying and clinging to Shuuto-kun while he looks ahead with an empty expression. Even now, as vividly as the day it happened. This revenge is righteous. Kobamatsu thought they were doing the right thing, even if it isn’t necessarily the right way to do it.

“You’re pretty handy, huh?” Kobamatsu-san said to the rugged man, who was much quieter than the rest of the group.

“Do you work in construction?”

“Huh? Yeah… Well, something like that.”

He seemed comfortable using the electric drill. The man looked to be in his late 20s, or early 30s. His height was the same as Kobamatsu’s at 178cm, but he had a much stronger build. He was rather handsome as well. His face had a dark suntan, compared to his otherwise pale skin.

“It’s better if we don’t know too much about each other,” the leader suddenly said. “We may be cooperating today, but we’ll each go our separate ways eventually. If something goes south for one of us, they won’t be able to identify the others if they don’t know anything. Think of it as protecting each other.”

“But… Yeah, you’re right.” Kobamatsu, who had relatively poor social skills, was happy to feel like part of a “community.”

“We aren’t criminals. We won’t hurt or kill Yamaguchi unless it’s strictly necessary. We don’t want to stoop to his level. Our goal is to punish them so that they don’t go back to a life of crime, but that method comes with some big risks,” the leader said quietly. He was probably a bit younger than Kobamatsu, but his deep voice and dignified expression made him seem strangely persuasive.

“What should we call each other, then?”

“How about… Undertaker-san? It’s fine for us to know each others’ jobs, right?” Someone said from behind them. The small woman from before is carrying a tray of coffee. “Sorry, I just picked something without thinking first.”

“That’s fine. What about you, then?” Kobamatsu said after taking a cup of coffee from her.

“‘Chef’ I suppose.”

“Then I’ll be ‘Doctor,’” the leader said.

“Then I’ll be… ‘Carpenter’ I guess,” the rugged man said.

That’s how the four of them got their nicknames. When the other woman returned from watching the captives, she shared that she’s a “preschool teacher.” Those nicknames sounded almost like a motley group you’d see in an apocalypse movie.

And so, the group began living together. They told the neighbours not to worry about all the new people going in and out, since they were all friends sharing the house. They’re relieved that someone is going to be there and don’t mind the extra people since it’s bad for the crime rate in the area if the house was to be left vacant.

Kobamatsu had lived an ordinary life until now. The only thing he ever did that surprised anyone was becoming a funeral director. It’s a job that other people often look down on, after all. After graduating from university, he still hadn’t decided on a job until he was moved by the work done by the director at his grandfather’s funeral. After working part time for a year, he decided to take a job at a funeral home.

He had to be careful, since there's so many conventions and traditions. It's tough work, and the holidays are irregular, but it's rewarding. And no matter what happens in the world, there's never a shortage of work to be done. He feels grateful for that after watching his father struggle to find work in construction after the economic bubble burst. More than anything, he feels that doing something meaningful for people at the end of their lives adds value to his own life, as well. It gives him confidence even if he has problems with self worth due to not being attractive or funny.

It was fine when he was still young, but now that his parents were gone, and he was getting close to 50, he realized how lonely he was without any friends, a wife, or children. It wasn't exactly easy to meet anyone while conducting funerals. At his current rate, he might die alone without anyone to attend his own funeral. For someone who had been doing the same thing every day like Kobamatsu, having 5 new people in his life was refreshing. Having someone there to say "welcome home" to him made him happy, even if the one saying it was a criminal. He was glad to always have someone nearby.

All 5 of them had their own lives and jobs, which they continued living as usual between shifts of watching Yamaguchi. Each of them got a cheap phone to contact each other, and tried to keep watch in pairs. They had two rules.

"Never use physical violence."

"Whenever you talk to them, have someone else on the lookout."

The rules were put in place so they wouldn't have to hurt their captives. Kobamatsu's new roommates couldn't be bad people if they didn't want to hurt anyone, right? They tried to have pairs keeping watch as much as possible. It became something like a rule that they should stay home as much as possible when they weren't working, unless they had something important to do. In the unlikely event that someone had to keep watch alone, they had cameras installed in the living room and captives' room. Although it couldn't record sound, it could make sure nobody broke the rules.

They also had a rule to stay in the living room unless they were bathing or using the bathroom. Only Carpenter and Chef had stable

work schedules. Kobamatsu's work was completely irregular, and Preschool Teacher had to work the night shift. Doctor hardly got any time off, so it was physically demanding for him to monitor the captives.

Carpenter was a jack of all trades, but cooking was his specialty. Chef and Carpenter ended up cooking for everyone between watch shifts. Chef in particular took on a lot of housework, and often cleaned the house. Preschool Teacher and Kobamatsu were particularly tolerant of "filth" due to their work. They took on the job of cleaning up after the captives, since it didn't bother them as much. It was Doctor's job to hurt them. He did this by taking large quantities of their blood. He took enough that it wouldn't kill them, but they would be too weak to move. Thanks to him, they didn't fight back much.

At first, the captives tried to convince their wardens to let them go. The captors told Yamaguchi and Irie how hard their victims had it, and how cruel they had been, but they didn't care at all. They started off talking nicely to their captives, but it didn't help. Eventually, Yamaguchi and Irie started acting rude and nasty towards the group. After a while, they started to only shout abuse at the group when all 5 of them were together. They spewed violent threats. It was like they forgot who had control of whether they lived or died. The group spent countless hours being showered in inhumane insults. Any normal person would suffer emotional and mental strain from it.

Unfortunately for the captives, they weren't dealing with normal people. Terrible things were done to those two in that swelteringly hot, soundproofed room. Preschool Teacher started calling it "execution time." She was the one who enjoyed execution time the most. She had a baby face, despite being in her 20s, so Kobamatsu was surprised at how ruthless she could be. She was clearly angry about something. Maybe something happened between her and Yamaguchi…

On the other hand, Carpenter and Chef didn't seem to enjoy execution time very much. Doctor didn't make his opinion clear. Kobamatsu felt torn about it. He started to get excited when the time

came, but would later feel embarrassed and disgusted with himself. But it was a necessary evil to reform the captives.

Despite being locked up and kept unable to move, they never gave up. They continued to live like that for over a month. Despite how inconvenient and difficult their lives became, they all enjoyed having a sense of purpose and belonging. Eventually, everyone in the group started to notice some things about the others.

Doctor started to become a burden on the rest of the group, since he didn't have enough time off to keep watch. Preschool Teacher was a close second, since she worked odd hours and often had to work at night. This put a heavy burden on Carpenter and Chef. Despite the fact that he's providing the house, Kobamatsu still felt guilty when he got called in to work. Everyone had a hard time every day. It was both a mental and physical strain. However, they persisted due to their resentment toward Yamaguchi.

The strange cohabitation of the group of 5 people of different ages and occupations continued. Of course there were occasional quarrels, but they never forgot to be reserved and grateful to each other. They naturally started to feel more like family. They spoke politely to each other, and apologized when necessary. They never directly revealed much about themselves, but gradually told more personal stories over time. They chatted and gossiped. They laughed a lot.

When two of them watched the captives together, they would spend more time talking than paying attention to the prisoners. They'd spend that time talking about problems in their lives. Kobamatsu was able to give advice based on his work as a funeral director, like what gifts to give to people who attended a memorial service. They're usually given out around 3 months after the funeral service, so it's best to anticipate the season it'll be. Everyone occasionally wonders about what they'll do when their parents pass away, so his advice put them at ease.

Kobamatsu enjoyed his time with Chef the most. He was happier sharing a house with her than he was about anything to do with Yamaguchi. Perhaps Chef also had similar feelings toward Kobamatsu. According to the security camera, nothing special ever

happened between the two, other than one time when they came home together.

It was a time when the two of them had gone shopping, and walked home together. Chef had been absorbed in their conversation, and didn't notice a student riding his bike while looking at his phone. Kobamatsu grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the way so she didn't get hurt. Kobamatsu used his large body to shield her, who had a small build. She was surprised, and seemed embarrassed when she thanked him. When Kobamatsu apologized for touching her without thinking, she said "I didn't mind it." As evidence, she wrapped her arms around one of his.

There was a warm breeze on that summer evening. They listened to the bugs sing as they smelled dinner cooking in the houses they passed by. Children could be heard in the distance, as well as the sound of stepping on fallen leaves. They were only alone together for a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity to them. Kobamatsu thought about how if they had met under different circumstances, they really could have spent their whole lives together. But he was well aware that the only reason they met was because of this bizarre situation they found themselves in. It's "Undertaker" that she likes, not "Hiroshi Kobamatsu."

In the end, that was the only time they touched, though they still spoke together in private. Kobamatsu learned a few things about Chef. She wasn't part of the kidnapping from the start. She knew Yua Irie and was following her, and happened to end up in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was also the only one in the group who had a grudge against Irie instead of Yamaguchi. She grew up in poverty, divorced her husband, and lost both her parents and her little sister. She didn't have a single relative left. Kobamatsu also learned that her real name was "Sachiyo Gorou."

Despite their strange situation, Kobamatsu and the others grew to have "bonds" and "sympathy for each other," unlike that of siblings or family. They worried about each other, and despite taking care not to get too close to one another. They felt even closer than family.

One day, a typhoon hit Asahikawa, though they're rare in Hokkaido. Everyone in the group was deeply concerned for the others' safety, They spent the day snuggling up together, and celebrating when someone came home safe. They learned how nice it is to worry about others, and have them worry about you in return. At the same time, everyone but Kobamatsu wondered what the future had in store for them.

Yamaguchi and Irie were still unyielding. They hadn't reflected on their actions at all. If they had let their captives go at this point, they would have been reported for sure. Kobamatsu was ready for a war of attrition with his new friends. He was also relieved, and glad he didn't have to live alone again. He never wanted to let go of that life, even if it meant a life of crime and cleaning up after the prisoners. Kobamatsu started to feel like the end was near, and was filled with anxiety and fear over the passage of time. He told himself that even if he didn't know what would happen a week from now, tomorrow would be fine.

And so, the day finally came.

When Kobamatsu got home from work, Preschool Teacher greeted him in a panic.

"I'm glad you're here! I didn't know what to do, since I was alone!"

"What happened?"

Preschool Teacher fell to her knees at the end of the hallway.

"What the hell happened?!" Apparently she had been watching the captives alone all day today.

"She's bleeding," she said quietly.

"Bleeding?"

"Yeah, Irie is."

"From where?"

Kobamatsu thought right away that something must have happened between them, and Preschool Teacher hurt Irie. Preschool Teacher didn't answer the question.

"Where is she bleeding from?!" Kobamatsu asked again, trying not to sound aggressive.

Eventually, she uncomfortably mumbled, “from her lower half.”

“What?” He didn’t know how to respond to that. “Um, is it because… she’s a woman?” Kobamatsu asked if it could be an illness of some sort, but Preschool a teacher shook her head.

“I thought she was menstruating at first, too, but… When she rolled over in her bed, blood suddenly started gushing out.”

“But…”

“What should we do? It’s definitely not normal!” Preschool teacher grabbed Kobamatsu by his shirt collar and hit her fist against his chest, like it was his fault.

“I don’t know what to do, either…”

Irie fainted after that. Preschool Teacher tried to call Doctor, but she couldn’t get through to him.

“What about someone else?”

“Carpenter couldn’t come, either. I was just about to call you and Chef when you got here.”

Apparently the bleeding had started just as Kobamatsu was getting home. Kobamatsu went to check on the situation for himself. The puddles of blood weren’t very big, but there were several besides the one on the bed. He thought about calling an ambulance, but there would be no way to hide their crime. On the other hand, letting Irie die would be unforgivable.

“Ahh, what to do…”

Kobamatsu and Preschool a teacher were completely panicking. They desperately tried calling their friends, and finally managed to get ahold of Carpenter.

“Got it, I’ll be there soon. I’ll stop by the hospital where Doctor works and tell him what happened.”

Carpenter agreed that they shouldn’t call an ambulance, so he promised to hurry. Kobamatsu was ashamed that someone younger than him was so calm and reliable. Carpenter returned to the house half an hour later. It was a long, horrifying 30 minutes. Doctor comes in with him, and seems to understand the urgency of the situation.

“What happened?”

“Nothing… She just rolled over in her sleep, and blood started pouring out.”

Doctor doesn't seem particularly distressed about it. He goes to examine Irie with the very panicked Preschool Teacher. Doctor stands up and kicks Yamaguchi, who was sleeping on the floor. Twice in a row. Once aiming for the stomach, then once for the head. Yamaguchi curls up after the first kick, so the second one hits his knee instead. Kobamatsu and Carpenter rush over to stop Doctor. Violence is prohibited. The most shocking part was seeing a doctor trying to hurt someone.

"Crap!" Doctor shouts.

"First let's leave the room, then please tell us about her condition," Kobamatsu said, urging Doctor toward the door.

Preschool Teacher followed behind them. Just then, Chef comes home.

"What happened?" She asks to clarify the bizarre atmosphere. Her expression stiffens immediately.

"It was probably… a miscarriage. It was in the early weeks of the pregnancy," Doctor says, sounding disgusted.

Carpenter picks up the grocery store bag that Chef dropped out of shock. It sounded like something broke, and two red apples rolled out onto the floor.

"No way! I had no idea she was pregnant," Preschool teacher shouts.

"It was my responsibility. I should have done a blood test beforehand." Doctor, who had regained his composure, lowered his head.

"This couldn't have been stopped, since nobody knew. Apart from that, what will we do? Her life could be at risk as she is now."

Though the words weren't comforting, there were more important things to worry about right then.

"The bleeding has slowed down, so we'll keep an eye on her. However, she needs a blood transfusion. She's blood type O. Are any of you the same type?" Doctor calmly looked around at everyone.

Preschool Teacher and Carpenter raised their hands.

"But… Is it really okay to take her to the hospital?"

"What happens when we get there? How do we explain it?" Preschool teacher asked. Doctor shook his head.

“Fortunately, she hasn’t lost as much blood as I thought. Just the two of you should be enough.”

Doctor took about 400mL from both of them, and transfused it into Irie. Though the situation was still touch and go, it was no longer an emergency. Kobamatsu and Chef prepared dinner for everyone, since they couldn’t help. Kobamatsu was painfully aware that his time with the group had run out.

“My mom’s curry used to be my favourite, but now it’s yours. My mom’s curry is too sweet. I like how the ginger is still crisp.” Kobamatsu didn’t know what to talk about, so he ended up just talking about food.

“Oh, really? I just sauté garlic and finely chopped ginger together before adding them in. If you like it that much, I’ll be sure to make it again sometime.”

“Yeah, maybe next time.”

They both smiled, knowing that there wouldn’t be a “next time.” They had pork miso soup for dinner that night. It’s filled with lots of vegetables. Chef wanted everyone to get some good nutrition, even if it was just one meal’s worth. She added potatoes, onions, daikon, carrots, and even yacon.

The other dishes included salt grilled saury, and boiled vegetables that Kobamatsu made. They also had mixed grain rice, which was Preschool Teacher’s favourite. Kobamatsu and the other men thought it was “bird food,” but the women said it was healthy. Preschool Teacher didn’t feel well after having her blood drawn, so she hardly touched her food. Carpenter, on the other hand, ate well. Doctor didn’t eat much, as usual for him. They all knew that this was the end for them. After setting out the apples for dessert, Preschool Teacher burst into tears.

“…Is this our fault?”

“It’s hard to say. It could have been from stress, but since she wasn’t very far along, there could have simply been a problem with the fertilized egg itself. The baby could have started off weak. There’s no way to tell what caused it.” Doctor tried to cheer her up by telling her that the fetus was just painlessly excreted along with the blood.

But everyone knew that it wasn't a proper environment for her to carry out her pregnancy.

"Don't worry about it," Chef said clearly.

"What?" Preschool Teacher gave her a reproachful look.

Chef held out her hand for an apple with a clear expression.

"It's fine. She was predisposed to having a miscarriage. Apparently it's happened to her before."

"Still, this time it could have been-" Carpenter said, unable to stay silent anymore.

However, Chef cut him off with a loud laugh. Everyone was astonished. Nobody had ever heard her laugh like that before. Of course, Kobamatsu hadn't, either.

"There's nothing to worry about. Even if she'd given birth safely, it wouldn't survive. That girl is no stranger to miscarriages and childbirth," Chef spoke in a strange tone, holding her sides with laughter. "There's no need for us to feel bad about it. I'm sure she's grateful, too, since she won't have to kill the baby and dump the body."

In an instant, everyone's complexion changed. Everyone was terrified of both her maniacal laughter, as well as the fact that Chef didn't seem to be lying.

"I said before that I wouldn't forgive her, right? As a teenager she ran away from home a lot, and would live with men she didn't know. Of course, that's not a proper life. She got pregnant a few times, and ended up miscarrying most of them. The babies she did give birth to ended up getting thrown in a dam or the sewers."

Everyone was disgusted by what they were hearing, to the point where they couldn't even swallow the food in their mouths.

"That's awful… Why would you do that…?" Preschool Teacher looked angry.

"That's just the type of person she is," Chef said coldly. "She started working part time at the same company as me. I took her under my wing, but I immediately regretted it… I let her stay at my place, but then money kept going missing from my wallet."

She was fired after a month, because couldn't get up for work in the morning. Chef was always trying to wake her up, but she'd just go

back to sleep. It wasn't just a matter of being late, she'd sometimes show up to work near the end of her shift. Just when Chef thought she couldn't leave a person like that to her own devices, Irie met Yamaguchi.

"I couldn't help it, so I paid the security deposit for a separate apartment so I could kick her out. If I didn't, she would've brought Yamaguchi to live in my apartment."

It took a big chunk out of her savings, but it was better than having a parasite living with her. She swore she would cut ties with Irie afterwards, but couldn't bring herself to do it. After all, she'd just end up bothering someone else.

"I wanted to find a place nearby, so I could check up on them sometimes. I noticed that they never seemed to have problems with money, even though neither of them worked, and just played pachinko sometimes. I had no idea how they were getting that much money."

She couldn't help but be curious, so she decided to follow them on "that night." She was surprised to see three people kidnapping the people she was following, but couldn't bring herself to stop them. Chef's anger towards Irie was deep. Far deeper than she'd realized. If they had escaped, they would definitely hurt someone again.

"That's why there's nothing to worry about. You don't need to mourn the loss of her baby. We've done nothing wrong. Yamaguchi and Yua are the ones in the wrong," Chef said, gently placing her hand on Preschool Teacher's shoulder to stop her from crying.

As Kobamatsu listened to her monotone voice, he thought about how big of a coincidence this all was. They say that truth is stranger than fiction, but was it really fate that led these 5 to meet on that night?

"But… Is it really okay?" Kobamatsu said timidly. He didn't have a reason to object to what Chef had said, but he couldn't stop the unease in his chest. "Is this really the result that we wanted? What if we wake up one day and they're dead?"

"In order to protect ourselves, the five of us have to—" Carpenter has to hold back Preschool Teacher, who has lost her patience.

“No, it’s just as he said. This isn’t okay. We’ve… gone too far.” Carpenter really is reliable.

“Let’s… stop this. We should release the two of them,” Kobamatsu said clearly, looking each member of the group in the eye. He gained the courage to speak up after hearing that Carpenter felt the same way as him. Is this what it means to borrow someone else’s authority?

“No way! If we let them go now, the police will bust down the door.”

“Before that happens, everyone should turn themselves in. There’s still time to turn this around,” Carpenter said.

This would soon turn into something that can’t be undone. Then, nobody could be saved.

“No! We have to make them suffer more. Torment them until they never commit a crime again!”

Of course, nobody wanted to go to the police. After all, why should they be arrested when it’s Yamaguchi and Irie’s fault? Even if it’s unreasonable, Kobamatsu could understand why they didn’t want to accept it.

“If, by some chance, they die, we’ll really become unforgivable criminals!” Carpenter shouts.

That just made Preschool Teacher withdraw even more. She covered her ears and shook her head, saying “no” repeatedly.

“Will they really change their ways just because we kept them locked up? As Carpenter said, one of them might die at this rate. What would we do then? If we turn ourselves in before this gets any worse, we might be able to avoid prison.”

Doctor looked displeased with what Kobamatsu said. He almost looked like he was in pain. He really thought that their captives would have given up by now. He truly believed that they would beg for forgiveness after going through so much torture, but instead he was met with resistance. They responded to any abusive language with a grin, refused to answer questions, and ignored the group imprisoning them. Even while covered in their own filth, they still didn’t give up.

It gradually became harder to talk to them, probably because they were losing their willpower from their confinement. But there

were no signs that they'd been "reformed." Everyone knew for sure that they would just go right back to committing crimes as soon as they were free.

"There's no end in sight. Do we even know if those two have a conscience at all? If they never had one to start with, nothing we do is going to change that."

Doctor looked even more pained, while Preschool Teacher mumbled to herself. Only Chef looked straight at Kobamatsu, and responded to him.

"You're right. I don't think we can avoid jail time at this point, though. We've already passed the point of no return. There's no going back to our old lives. We'll all lose our jobs and friends."

"…" Kobamatsu lowered his head. How would he live without his job?

"Anyway, think about it. We've all had an eventful day. For now, it's better to leave Irie alone than to move her around. We can discuss this again tomorrow," Doctor said before returning to the hospital. The remaining 4 barely spoke to each other after that.

The next day, Chef, Kobamatsu, and Carpenter all went to work as usual. Preschool Teacher had the day off. Chef was worried about her, so she left work early. Doctor got home around noon, after his night shift ended. They were all occupied with thoughts of what would happen if they lost their jobs.

Kobamatsu wasn't particularly close to anyone at his work, but his boss helped him out a lot, and his coworkers were nice people. Losing that would definitely be hard for him. Especially if they all saw him as nothing but a criminal. He had to decide what he was going to do. He decided that he had no choice but to push on until the end. When he came home, he was surprised to see Carpenter sitting on the couch.

"They're gone," Carpenter said.

The door to the confinement room was open, and the inside was completely empty. There were no signs of Yamaguchi, Irie, or the other three. They had already canceled their phones. There was an envelope addressed to each of them on the table. Enclosed was one million yen, and a letter from Doctor.

“If you report it, an incriminating video of you will be made public. I hope you’ll keep silent. I’m sorry about bribing you, but please take the money and forget everything. I’m truly grateful for all you’ve done for me until now.”

That’s all that was written. An unsatisfying farewell.

“But we know where he works, right?” Carpenter said.

Kobamatsu nodded. “…But with the way things are, it might be better to just forget about all this…

“Mm…” He mumbled timidly.

Conflicting voices in his mind telling him that he can’t do this, but also that he should just leave things how they are caused Kobamatsu to crumple to the floor. The scent of grilled saury lingers in the living room from dinner. In that room where the scent of everyday life still remains, Kobamatsu agonized, riddled with anxiety. And so, he chose silence. He decided to change his thinking. This must be a dream.

Part 8

I listened quietly to Kobamatsu-san’s story while the sun slowly set and the living room grew dim.

“It… It’s all true.”

It’s hard to believe. Two people were imprisoned in this house, and one small life was extinguished. All by the hand of this timid, harmless looking man in front of me.

“I got rid of the mats, and Carpenter helped me clean the room. We couldn’t fully get rid of the odour, though,” Kobamatsu-san says as he guides us to the adjacent room where they were confined.

There’s no noticeable stains on the floor, however the room is filled with the unpleasant scent of bacteria. It’s similar to the scent of death, as well as dirty public washrooms. The one thing that’s clear is the feeling that some “creature” was trapped here.

“I know it sounds bizarre…. You must be surprised.”

“No… More like bewildered…”

That’s truly how I feel right now. Even with the evidence right here, I can’t wrap my head around the man in front of me being capable of something so appalling.

“When we first trapped them here, I couldn’t stop worrying about if what we were doing was right or not. I was relieved when they escaped… But I also felt like I was betrayed.”

“They did it of their own free will. What do you have to worry about?” Sakurako-san says in a bright voice.

Kobamatsu forces a smile. He isn’t very good at it.

“So you haven’t seen any of them since then, right?”

“Yes. I have no way of contacting any of them… I’ve thought about going to the police countless times, but I can’t bring myself to betray any of them. I still scour the newspaper every day, looking for an article about them or Yamaguchi.”

Kobamatsu-san turns on the lights and rolls onto the couch, facing the ceiling. Even Carpenter has no idea who Kobamatsu-san is. But his worst nightmare has now become a reality. Yamaguchi and Irie died in a fire, and Gouro committed suicide.

“…Maybe they didn’t know what to do after they got out, so they killed themselves? They were wanted by the police, after all.”

“Maybe, but… Then why did Gouro-san die?”

“We can only speculate, but my guess is that she committed suicide from the guilt, or that she was killed by someone else from your group,” Sakurako-san says without considering how her words might affect Kobamatsu-san .

To be fair, we were all thinking about it.

“If they do an autopsy, they’ll discover how those two really died, won’t they? It should be clear whether they were dead before the fire started, or if they were burned alive.”

“You have a point, but what if they were unconscious when they were set on fire? And there’s no real justification for performing an autopsy on a fire victim. This is Japan, the police will probably chalk it up to suicide and call it a day,” Sakurako-san says like it’s obvious.

“What are you talking about?! It was a fire! Of course it wasn’t suicide!“ I exclaim.

“No… As long as there’s no obvious evidence of foul play, they’ll just rule it a suicide. It’s not uncommon at all for no autopsy to be done in situations like this,” Kobamatsu-san says to affirm what Sakurako-san was saying.

By examining the lungs, it's easy to tell if they were burned alive or not. But that will be easily overlooked if no autopsy is done in the first place. Aoba-san's words about how every corpse should have an autopsy comes to mind. Why is it so hard to face death? Why ignore the final words a person can leave behind? So many details can be overlooked without an autopsy.

"It would have been an atypical suicide. There were no signs of struggle, but it's still possible that she was murdered," Sakurako-san says, crossing her arms.

"But…"

The blood drains from Kobamatsu's face. Unfortunately, there were definite signs of someone else being in her room.

"What should I do?" Kobamatsu-san says, though his voice is muffled as he's covering his face with both hands.

"…How about you tell the police the truth first?"

"No. I can't go to the police alone. I can't turn myself in unless everyone else is with me."

He could have gotten a lighter sentence if he'd turned himself in and helped the investigation.

"But those people might have killed Gouro-san, right?"

"Even so, I won't turn myself in. If I make one wrong move, I could end up in the same situation as her. I absolutely can't betray them, even if they're the ones who killed her," Kobamatsu-san says decisively. He's not as timid as I once thought.

"Then there's no choice but to look for them, if you won't turn yourself in without them. Otherwise you'll spend the rest of your life wondering what you should have done differently."

Kobamatsu-san nods, undaunted by Sakurako-san's rudeness.

"You're right. Strangely enough, there was a hit and run 3 days later. Maybe it was fate."

I suddenly realized something about Gouro-san's room. When she died, she left a pot of curry on the stove. Could she have been making it so she could fulfill her promise to Kobamatsu-san ? Even if she wasn't going to actually give it to him, it could have been symbolic.

"What's wrong, boy?"

“Nothing…”

I wipe away the tears that are welling up in my eyes. I swear that I’ll find the other three. I want to know why Gouro-san died. For Kobamatsu-san’s sake, at least. Actually, it could be that Gouro-san wasn’t the only one of Kobamatsu-san’s friends that died. If they could all drop everything to live together in this house, it’s likely that they didn’t have anyone waiting for them to come back. If that’s the case, they could be dead and nobody has discovered their bodies. If they had been discovered already, there would be something about it in the recent deaths section of the news. The summer heat didn’t linger for very long this year, so the smell wouldn’t be too bad yet. My mom manages an apartment, and Kobamatsu-san works at a funeral home, so we both understand the urgency of the situation.

“But what should we do?” Kobamatsu-san says, sounding troubled. He tried his best on his own, but he hasn’t been able to locate any of them so far.

“It’s just like a puzzle. Start by filling in the pieces you know.”

“The pieces I know?”

Kobamatsu-san and I glance at each other. Sakurako-san nods, like it should be obvious what she means.

“There’s no need to rush. If you have enough dots, you’ll eventually form a line.”

“Even if you say that…”

Between all his companions, did anyone leave enough “dots?”

“The first thing that comes to mind is the names you gave each other. You referred to each other by your professions, right?”

“Yeah.”

Undertaker, Doctor, Carpenter, Preschool Teacher, and Chef. Maybe I can think of something that connects them together that Kobamatsu-san and Sakurako-san haven’t noticed. I want to show off my good side with something other than my order at the cafe. But no matter how hard I try, I can’t think of anything useful from just those names.

“The ones that bother me are Doctor, Carpenter, and Preschool Teacher. Those three are the ones who originally started the abduction.”

“Yeah… They had a strange relationship. I think they were strangers before the incident. They didn’t seem like friends, and they were always reserved around each other. I don’t know how they knew each other.”

Those three didn’t seem to have anything in common, from their jobs, to their ages, and their genders.

“But there’s always the internet.”

I still sometimes look at the forum that Phantom showed me for posting about criminals. Maybe they met there, and all decided to do something about Yamaguchi together.

“Also, they all worked within half an hour of the house.”

He can be sure of that because of how long it took them to get home after contacting them. Still, that’s a huge area to cover. How many medical professionals, childcare workers, and construction workers are there in Asahikawa?

“If they all went home right after work, then you should know their work hours, right?”

Kobamatsu nods and looks up at the sky while he tries to remember.

“Let’s see… Carpenter had the most stable shifts. He would come home at 10pm every night. Doctor and Preschool Teacher’s shifts were all over the place, but they mostly worked at night. Chef’s schedule fluctuated a bit, but was generally from morning until evening.”

I know that Gouro-san worked in the food industry. Kobamatsu-san had irregular working hours, too. It was a huge burden on Carpenter and Chef to keep watch so much. Since Doctor was the leader, and Preschool Teacher was strong willed, Gouro-san and Carpenter didn’t feel like they could speak up.

“Those two never complained, but I know they sometimes went to work without getting any sleep.”

On the other hand, they also wanted to see Yamaguchi and Irie punished. Why did Carpenter hate Yamaguchi so much?

“At least you have pictures of them, right? Or did they take all of those with the video?” I don’t really expect him to, though.

“It would have been dangerous to have pictures of each other,” he says.

I guess that should have been obvious. Instead, he offers to draw pictures of them. Since he’s drawing four people who aren’t here, some of the details will be off. However, the overall impression and main features of each person is what’s important. He presents his results.

“As a kid, I wanted to be a manga artist,” Kobamatsu-san says embarrassedly.

I feel bad for imagining the art at Kougami’s house when I heard him say he’ll draw them. Even if it is a good drawing, it’s not a perfect replica. At most, these will only serve as a reference point. Still, it’s useful to visualize the easy to understand features, such as Preschool Teacher having mushroom shaped, bobbed hair, as well as a mole by her upper lip. I can tell through his drawings how much he cared for and cherished his friends. It makes my chest hurt.

“There’s little doubt that Carpenter, Doctor, and Preschool Teacher were acquainted with each other while preparing to confine Yamaguchi. There must have been a point of contact between those three. We just need to identify one of them,” Sakurako-san mutters while looking at the drawings.

“They could have had a shared interest.”

She asks Kobamatsu-san if there’s anything that Doctor, Carpenter, and Preschool Teacher could have all been interested in.

“No idea…” he says while thinking hard about it.

“Oh well. Among these three, the easiest one to establish the place of employment for is Preschool Teacher. We’ll start from there,” Sakurako-san says with the drawing of Preschool Teacher in hand.

Kobamatsu-san and I glance at each other. Neither of us understand why right away. Sakurako-san sighs at us.

“It’s not complicated. If she’s really a Preschool Teacher with irregular hours, we just need to check each childcare facility that’s open at night. There’s probably not that many in Asahikawa.”

If she’s not really a preschool teacher, but just has a job where she looks after children, this could be pretty difficult. Sakurako-san takes my phone while I’m thinking.

“I know you don’t like phones, but can’t you at least get a tablet or something?”

“Why? So you can email me constantly?”

“It wouldn’t be constant…”

Does she really refuse to get a phone because of me? Anyway, we start looking up childcare facilities in Asahikawa. Just as Sakurako-san said, there aren’t very many childcare facilities in Asahikawa that are open 24 hours a day.

“For now, let’s hit up these two that are nearby.”

She tosses my phone at me, but I manage to catch it and put it in my pocket.

“Please don’t tell me you’re going in person,” Kobamatsu-san says in surprise.

“Do we have any other options?”

“You have a point, but… Why are you going this far for me?”

I happened to be acquainted with a woman who died… That’s the only connection I have to this case. Sakurako-san’s only connection is that she happened to find Gouro-san’s corpse. It’s no wonder why Kobamatsu-san is confused.

“…Actually, I’ve also been concerned about that hit and run. I passed by right after it happened. I was just on my way home from shopping… I can still remember the sight of that paramedic, desperately trying to resuscitate the victim.”

If the victim was already dead at that point, that would make her the first corpse I ever saw.

“Is that so…”

I’ll never forget the eerie feeling I got when I saw that accident. There were people frantically trying to see if she was okay, people who were grieving or resentful, people who felt indifferent, people who were offended by the number of bystanders or the road closure, and most of all… The people who were smiling. People can view the death or misfortune of others as entertainment, as long as it doesn’t affect them personally. I guess it’s the same as ancient Romans watching slaves kill each other in a coliseum. Humans haven’t changed compared to hundreds, or even thousands, of years ago.

“I don’t particularly care about that incident. But if this kid is getting involved, I can’t just stay out of it. Otherwise, he would try to handle this case alone,” Sakurako-san says, shrugging her shoulders.

“I wouldn’t do something so reckless.”

“You must be really close siblings.” Kobamatsu-san looks dazzled by our conversation.

“We fight sometimes, too.”

She doesn’t correct him about us being siblings. I’m sad, but also happy. I’ve heard that the more time people spend together, the more they resemble each other. They talk in unison, and use the same gestures, for example. I can’t think of any other relationship that would make a good excuse, anyway. He might have just been trying to ask a leading question, but I’m happy he thinks we’re similar. That must mean that Sakurako-san and I have spent a lot of time together. There’s no point in refuting the idea that we’re siblings, so we both let it slide.

Part 9

Anyway, it’s time to check out those preschools. Unfortunately, Kobamatsu-san has to head to work right now. It’ll be a lot harder to search for the other 3 without him, but there’s no helping it. Kobamatsu-san keeps apologizing for not being able to go with us as we head out to the two nearby daycares.

It feels like it’s been ages since I’ve been in Sakurako-san’s car. Maybe it’s due to all our time apart, but I’m having a hard time keeping a conversation going. At least Diavel’s laughter fills the silence. It seems like she bought his newest CD. I know she doesn’t care, but I can’t stand the silence.

“My mom got a new rice cooker recently. The old one didn’t break or anything, but it was 10 years old so when you consider the energy cost and taste, it was time for a new one.”

She doesn’t even acknowledge that I said anything. I know she’s not interested in small talk like this, though.

“The old one is still usable, so it’s mine now. Sawa-san told me before that you can use them to make skeletal specimens.”

“Oh! Have you tried it out? I’d test it out, but gran would say no.”

Unsurprisingly, that got her interested. I can definitely see why gran would be against it, though.

“It’s kind of a hassle to add water every few hours so it doesn’t all boil off. It doesn’t smell too bad compared to just leaving the body out, though, which is nice.”

It’s important to keep the corpse at a consistent temperature at all times. Boiling can damage the bones. All you have to do is put the whole animal in a plastic bag with all the air removed, and warm it up for 2 days. That’s all.

“The size is a big limitation and you can’t leave it unsupervised, but it’s pretty simple.”

“I see. So, what did you simmer?”

“A rat. Tainaka-san gave me a big one. He doesn’t have many big snakes right now, so he has a lot of big rats to use up.”

Tainaka-san is a snake breeder in Biei who has to feed his snakes frozen rats and mice.

“I just recently took the bones out. I still haven’t treated or assembled them yet because I just thought… when you came back…”

“You should have said so earlier, I’d come back right away.”

“Yeah, but… I didn’t want to get in the way of your vacation.”

Actually, I was worried she was angry with me. That I may have hurt her. It would have been insincere to use bones to call her back. We continue the drive into the centre of the city, and soon see the first childcare facility.

“24 hour childcare - Rainbow ♪” the sign reads. It’s written in a round font, with each letter a different colour of the rainbow. They’re located on the third floor of the building. There’s photos on the walls of children laughing happily, playing in a playhouse, and building with wooden blocks. It looks like their “event of the month” was visiting Asahikawa zoo and picking apples at the orchard there. The walls of the stairwell are covered in hand drawn posters. I knock on the door, and a smiling woman carrying a baby greets us.

“Um… We’re actually here because we’re looking for someone?”

“Looking for someone?”

“Yeah.”

Despite our strange request, she keeps smiling, though she seems wary. She gives the baby she’s holding to her coworker and says, “could you take the kids to the TV room? We need to talk for a bit.” Her quick decision making and actions make me think that this daycare is well run. I feel bad making her feel uneasy, though…

“Sorry about that… So who are you looking for?” The woman asks amiably.

The woman has moderate length hair, held back with a cute cat hair pin. She looks to be around 30, and has distinct dimples on her face. Her name tag says “Takada.”

“The woman we’re looking for used to look after our grandma, so we felt bad that we never got to thank her. I heard that she worked at a daycare nearby, so I wanted to find her and thank her properly.” Sakurako-san makes up a plausible explanation for us.

“Wow, you must care a lot about your grandma.”

“The thing is, we don’t know her name. Our grandma likes drawing, so we asked her to draw a picture of the person we’re looking for,” Sakurako-san says as she takes out Kobamatsu-san’s picture.

When the teacher sees the picture, she looks surprised. “That’s Rui-sensei, isn’t it?” Takada-san calls in the teacher who she gave the baby to before. The other teacher smiles when she sees the picture.

“With that haircut and mole, it has to be Rui-sensei.”

“Your grandma is a great artist.” Takada-san praises the picture. I’ll have to tell Kobamatsu-san later.

“Rui-sensei…?”

“Yes, Rui Miki-chan… She used to work here, but…”

“But what?” Sakurako-san asks.

“She quit recently. It was really sudden, with no prior notice. She quit over the phone. I tried to call her again later, but her contract had been cancelled. When I tried to visit her apartment, she had already moved out. She even left some things behind in her locker.”

“Um, well…” I glance at Sakurako-san’s face, and notice her expression has suddenly turned serious.

“I always thought she was a bright yet serious girl, so I wonder what could have happened to make her move away so suddenly. I was worried, but… young people these days tend to quit for no reason, you know?”

“And besides…” Takada-san and another preschool teacher give each other a knowing look.

“What?”

Perhaps it’s because they don’t know who we are that they seem hesitant to talk about something. They silently exchange looks, as if they’re gauging how much they should say.

“Well, I think it had something to do with a man she was seeing.”

“A man?”

“Yeah.”

People love gossip. The juicier it is, the more they want to tell other people about it.

“Something seemed off about her. We were starting to wonder if something was going on in her private life, then she quit. Besides, she basically ran off into the night… you know? I just thought it seemed like she was with a bad man or something.”

Just as she finishes talking, a child starts crying. It sounds like a squabble broke out in the other room. The two women stop talking, as if they’ve come to their senses all of a sudden. The woman who was watching the children alone calls out to Takada-san slightly angrily. We should probably leave.

“Excuse me! Could you please tell us her old address?”

“Huh? I really don’t think you’re going to find Rui-sensei, even if you go there.”

Even so, her neighbours might be able to tell us something. Takada-sensei hesitantly gives us her address. I get the sense that they’re worried about getting in trouble, but are also morbidly curious about what happened.

I wonder if her sudden resignation has caused a lot of problems for her coworkers. Would Takada-san and the others feel the same

way if they knew the reason why she quit? I don't think they're bad people at heart. I'm sure they'll feel sad and remorseful after finding out the truth. That's why I hope that it at least isn't the worst possible outcome. No matter where she is, I sincerely hope that Rui Miki-san is still alive.

The apartment where she lived is near Tokiwa Park. Speaking of Tokiwa Park, I haven't been there in a while. There used to be a cotton candy machine in front of the store for only 50 yen, and I used to always beg my grandpa to get me some. I wonder if it's still there? The apartment itself seems fairly old. It's 4 stories tall, and made of reinforced concrete. The rent for a 2LDK apartment would be under 40 000 yen.

"The landlord might know where she moved to, but they probably won't tell us unless we have a good reason. My mom refuses to give contact information to anyone who isn't a blood relative."

"That sounds sensible."

I check the note I got from the daycare one more time to make sure this is the right place. I would have thought she lived a little closer to Kagura. This place is called Maison Nitta, so is the landlord maybe named Nitta-san? The mailboxes at the front of the building don't have name plates on them, probably for security reasons since this place doesn't look like it has automatic locks. One room has a sticker on it with a company name on it, but the corner is ripped so I can't read it fully. The other residents only have room numbers. Miki-san lived in room 102, but the number has been taken down from that one. After confirming that there's nobody living there, we walk around the outside to take a look. There's no curtains, so I can see that it's empty inside.

"Looks like it's vacant."

It could be taking a while to find a new tenant, or they could be leaving it vacant for a while to see if she comes back.

"Umm… What are you doing?" A suspicious voice calls out to me from behind.

“Oh… We came to visit Miki-san, but it looks like she moved away.”

A woman in her 50s is standing behind me, holding a shopping bag. “She sure did. It was really sudden, too.”

It’d be a pain if she thought we were suspicious, so I repeat the same lie Sakurako-san told earlier.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know where she moved to, either.”

“Can you tell us anything, no matter how small? Like if she’s still in the city or something?”

She crosses her arms with a troubled look, and shakes her head. “I really don’t know anything. It didn’t seem like she was coming home much for a while, then a week ago she suddenly said she was moving. She didn’t say anything about where she was going. I think she just didn’t want to bother me.”

“What do you mean by ‘bother me?’” Was she on the run from someone, or something?

“I wanted to ask, but I wasn’t comfortable sticking my nose in her business. She brought over some snacks to apologise to me for the inconvenience from her moving at night.”

“Did she have a moving company come at night? Or did she move herself out alone?” Sakurako-san asks after listening in silence.

“She didn’t hire anyone, but she didn’t do it alone, either. There were two men helping, they seemed like relatives.”

“What makes you think they were relatives?”

“Let’s see… They could have been her friends or her boyfriend, but they were a bit older than Rui-chan. They spoke kind of stiffly, just saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to each other.”

Miki-san’s neighbour scowls a bit at Sakurako-san’s rude tone. Sakurako-san takes out the portraits, but the neighbour seems unsure.

“It was nighttime so it was dark, and I wasn’t really watching them work. The two of them were quite tall, though. I might be able to tell if it were a photo, though,” she says.

“Well, that’s understandable.”

It’s hard to draw a portrait in the first place, especially without the model there. The overall impression can be different if it’s not a

shot of their full body, too.

“Do you know of anyone who was close to Miki-san? Someone who might know where she went?”

“I’m not sure. I’m not sure if she felt the same, but I considered us friends. Right after she moved in, her car got stuck in front of the apartment, so my husband and I helped her fix it.”

Her two daughters have already moved out, so she and her husband invited Miki-san to have dinner with them sometimes.

“That girl was thin, so I was worried that she wasn’t eating enough.”

To thank her, Miki-san would invite her neighbour to have yakiniku after she got paid, saying, “it’s lonely to go by myself.”

“It’s a shame about what happened, then.”

“Yeah, I’m worried about her. I hope she didn’t get into some kind of trouble…” The woman looks uneasy and sighs.

I don’t think we’ll get any other information out of her. I thank her for her time, but she stops me just as I turn to leave.

“Can I contact you if I see Rui-chan? I’d like to help you…”

“Really? Of course you can.”

It’s a dream come true. I promise to tell her if we happen to find her first.

“It would be nice to know if she’s doing okay.” The woman looks up at the dark sky and sighs. She looks like she’s given up. “…Rui-chan has a strong sense of justice, and she’s very in tune with other peoples’ emotions. You don’t meet people like that very often these days. I think that must make it hard for her to fit in with the rest of society…”

My eyes feel hot from the tears welling up in them.

“Make sure you find her… And let me know when you do.”

“I sure will.”

The woman grasps my hand firmly before going back to her apartment. Once we get back to the car, I suddenly feel exhausted.

“…That woman thinks so highly of her, but she still imprisoned and abused Yamaguchi and Irie-san.”

I can’t help but think about how Miki-san was the most excited for “execution time.”

“They do say that small dogs bark more.”

Hearing that doesn’t make me feel any better.

“Anyway… What do you think?”

“There isn’t much evidence, but it’s likely that the men helping her move were ‘Doctor’ and ‘Carpenter’,” Sakurako-san says, letting out a big sigh.

“…So ‘Carpenter-san’ still contacted the others afterwards…”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just feel bad for Kobamatsu-san, since he was left out.”

Kobamatsu-san had a lot of doubts, worries, and struggles, but he still did everything he could to help out. Even now, he’s genuinely worried about all of them, yet they excluded him.

“Maybe they were anxious about his involvement. He wasn’t part of their plan from the start. The three who originally planned the kidnapping had plenty of time to resolve themselves, but Kobamatsu decided to join on the spot.”

“I guess so, but…”

“Doctor, Carpenter, and Preschool Teacher may have taken their own lives already. We should try not to add Kobamatsu to that list,” Sakurako-san says to end the conversation.

“Anything else?”

For a while, my question remains unanswered. However, I don’t want to let that happen, so I turn down the volume on the stereo.

“The real evil might be one of those 5 people. I can’t deny the possibility that Hanabusa is involved somehow. Kobamatsu is a good man, but we don’t know about the others.” Sakurako-san’s face crumples as she says the word “Hanabusa”, as if she’s repulsed just uttering the word. She turns the volume up again. She turns it up way louder than it was before, seemingly out of spite.

The lead we worked so hard to find has hit a dead end. Now we have no choice but to look through each doctor in the city one by one, or find Carpenter somehow.

“It’d be nice if the city was smaller. I never really thought of Asahikawa as being that big, but I guess it is.” It’s only during firework festivals that you really realise just how many people live in this city.

“Anyway, we’re out of time for today. Go back home to your mother.”

She starts driving back to my house.

“…Oh yeah.”

“What?”

“Is gran still in Sapporo?”

“Yeah.”

“So you’re home alone?”

“For tonight. I have plans with Naoe tomorrow evening.”

That means she doesn’t have plans with anyone tonight. I can’t imagine she would do household chores, either.

“Then… Would you like to come eat at my place? Hector would be so happy, and I don’t think my mom would turn you away.”

“But…”

“You don’t have any plans, so it’s fine, isn’t it?”

Sakurako-san is frowning, but I ignore it. I call my mom to ask if it’s okay, and she says it’s fine.

“I don’t think you’d eat a well balanced meal on your own, so I have to make sure you have a proper meal while gran is away. I’d also like you to see my rat bones, if you have the time for it.”

“…Ah, that’s right.”

I know I’m bothering her, but I don’t feel right letting her go home to an empty house. She looks a lot thinner than she was before her trip, too. We stop to buy a cake for dessert before going to my house. Hector is so excited to see Sakurako-san after so long that he body slams her.

“He must have thought you were gone for good. He’s a friendly boy, but I guess his owner has a special place in his heart.” My mom laughs when she sees how Hector won’t leave Sakurako-san’s side for anything.

It’s heartwarming to see, but I’m also disappointed. I want my own dog. I’d give anything to hug Wolf again.

Part 10

Hector wouldn’t leave Sakurako-san alone for the whole evening, so I never got to show her my rat bones. Hector gets

nervous when it's time for her to leave. Sakurako-san gently says to Hector, "it's okay, I'm not abandoning you. Just wait a bit longer, and I'll be back with Ume." Hector is smart enough to understand, so he quietly watches her leave.

He must be lonely, because he chooses to sleep in my bed with me, rather than under it like normal. Sleeping with a medium or large breed dog in a single bed can be dangerous. The owner gets driven to a tiny corner, while the dog sprawls out.

The next day, it's raining. It's also a holiday, so nobody would be at the hospital or any construction sites. Sakurako-san is meeting Ariwara-san today, anyway… I hate the rain.

The day after, it's bright and sunny. Kobamatsu-san meets up with us in the early afternoon.

"Is that so…" He says with a lonely expression after listening to our report.

When we tell him about how we found Miki-san's house, but Carpenter and Doctor likely already helped her move out, Kobamatsu-san looks crestfallen.

"If something happened, I wish they would have asked for my help."

"I'm sure they just couldn't contact you."

Today, Sakurako-san and I are spending the morning driving around the Kagura and Nankou districts to look for buildings that are under construction. However, since it's a holiday, there's no signs of anyone at the construction sites.

"It really isn't easy searching for someone from scratch when you don't even know their name."

"I guess there isn't much I can do, then. It can't be helped," Kobamatsu-san says in a self-deprecating tone. I don't know how to respond.

Even though the holiday is getting in the way, we decide to extend our search into the afternoon. Kobamatsu-san hasn't had lunch yet, either, so we decide to go to a soba restaurant he recommends. While Kobamatsu-san teaches Sakurako-san how to slurp the noodles, my phone rings. I don't recognize the number at first, but once I get outside, I remember. It's Miki-san's neighbour.

Could she have found Miki-san already? That's my first thought, but things wouldn't go that smoothly. After I hang up the phone, I see Sakurako-san and Kobamatsu-san staring at me.

"We still don't know where Miki-san is. It's just that earlier the landlord saw a white van that she thinks might be the same one Miki-san used to move."

"Oh yeah, Carpenter drove a white van sometimes!" Kobamatsu-san says, suddenly full of energy.

"Do you know the licence plate?"

"Oh, no… Sorry, that's all I know." He scratches the back of his head as he apologises.

"The car had something that looked like wine corks as the bolt caps. It was strange, so the landlord remembered it."

Apparently it was parked at a liquor store. It might have just been a coincidence, but it's worth a shot. Fortunately, the soba restaurant is nearby. It's not a great lead, but I'd rather do something than just stay stagnant. After we finish our lunch, we head to the liquor store. The roads are crowded because it's a holiday. We try to hurry over there, but the car has probably left already. I look out the window to distract myself from my anxiety.

We end up arriving at the liquor store much earlier than expected.It looks like they specialise in sake, but they also carry wine. There's a white van in the parking lot.

"This looks like the right van."

Sure enough, there are corks stuck to the bolt caps on the licence plate.

"Oh!" Kobamatsu-san shouts once he walks around to the front of the car.

"This scratch on the bumper looks familiar. This must be Carpenter's car! It's the same model, too," Kobamatsu-san says confidently.

I walk around the car to see the grey scratch on the front. There's a large object that looks like a marimo on the front of the store (which are apparently called sugidama or sakabayashi.)

"Excuse me, who is the owner of this car here...?"

"Is something wrong with it?"

A burly, bald man replies from behind the counter. His voice is bold and loud.

“Sorry if this is rude to ask, but are you the owner of that van?”

“Yeah, I use it for deliveries.”

Kobamatsu-san is trying to be as polite as he can, but the shopkeeper is pretty blunt.

“Oh, is that so… Then have you loaned it to someone recently?“

The customer service smile disappears from the shopkeeper’s face. Does he think we’re here to cause trouble?

“No, but sometimes my son uses it. He’s been using it less ever since he opened his own shop, but he still does deliveries for me from time to time.”

“He has his own store?”

“Yeah, he likes to go mountain climbing, and he fell in love with Swiss cuisine when he went abroad. He suddenly quit his job and started a Swiss restaurant specialising in cheese fondue.”

“Cheese fondue!” Kobamatsu-san says in surprise. “He made it for dinner before. It was surprisingly good, and Preschoo- Miki-san really loved it.”

Apparently this is Carpenter’s parents’ house. Sakurako-san pulls out the portrait Kobamatsu-san made, and shows it to the shopkeeper.

“Sir, is this your son?”

“Hahaha! Well isn’t that something. Looks just like him. What, are you here to visit Tamotsu?” A smile returns to the shopkeeper’s face when he realises we aren’t here to cause trouble. Honestly, I was really scared, so it’s a huge relief.

“Y-yeah, that’s right. We met while climbing Mt. Kurodake, and promised to meet up again, but I lost his contact information. So when I saw that car outside, I thought that maybe…”

As soon as Kobamatsu-san mentions the bolt caps, the shopkeeper puffs out his chest proudly, and says “I put those on. Pretty cool, huh? Well, that’s fine. In that case, you should go to Tamotsu’s place directly. His shop’s closed for the day, but he’s having an air conditioner installed, so he should be there all morning.”

The shopkeeper goes back behind the counter, and takes a card out from beside the cash register. It has a simple illustration of a log house on a white background with the word “Joseph” written in decorative lettering.

“The address and website are written on the back. My son will be delighted. That boy’s always loved cooking. Well, there’s been some hard times, but my wife always says he’ll be happier wearing an apron than a suit that doesn’t match who he is. So please support him,” The shopkeeper says with a serious look in his eye, but a smile on his face.

“Excuse me, but when was the last time you spoke with your son?” I ask while looking over the business card. From his expression, I can tell that was a weird thing to ask so suddenly.

“Some time this morning. He lives with me since he can’t afford rent yet, but he usually stays at his store overnight. He hasn’t even hired a single employee yet.”

“I see,” Kobamatsu-san says, and leaves the store without another word.

I thank the owner of the store, then hurry outside as well. Upon finding out that Carpenter-san is safe, all the strength leaves my body out of relief. Once we’re back in Sakurako-san’s car, Kobamatsu-san lets out a muffled sob. At the very least, one of his friends is safe.

“I’m glad.”

I feel like I’m going to cry, too. When I turn to Sakurako-san, she has a very grim expression. She puts the address of Carpenter’s shop into the car navigation system. She stops the car at the convenience store next to the shop. Kobamatsu-san heads into the convenience store. There aren’t many rest stops when you travel around Hokkaido, so a lot of convenience stores on the main roads have signs on the bathrooms saying that they’re free for anyone to use. I still always buy something when I use their facilities, though.

“I’m going in, too.” I wanted to get something to drink, too, but Sakurako-san grabs my arms as I get up.

“Wait. Gouro is dead, and Miki is missing. We know that Carpenter is back to his everyday life, so it’s possible that he’s the traitor. It’s better to be safe than sorry. It would be safer for you to just

go home now.” Sakurako-san puts all her strength into holding my arm. She does have a point.

“The same goes for you, too, doesn’t it? If you think we’re in danger, make eye contact with me right away.” It’ll be our signal to escape.

“But…”

“It’ll be fine. I won’t do anything dangerous. Besides, you need me there because I have a phone. Without me, how are you going to call someone if anything happens? There aren’t many pay phones these days.”

“I guess you have a point…” she groans.

Kobamatsu-san gets back to the car while we’re talking.

“You mentioned that you like sweet things before, so I got you these. They’re really good.”

Kobamatsu-san hands Sakurako-san a cream puff. Sakurako-san narrows her eyes and stares before she accepts it.

“Is something wrong?”

“No…”

Kobamatsu-san looks puzzled by the tense atmosphere. He hands me a cream puff, too.

“If we’re all ready, let’s get going,” Sakurako-san says, then glances at me. She’s silently asking “do you understand?” Which, of course, I do.

The sky had been so blue this morning, but now it’s covered in a thin layer of cloud. This may be the calm before the storm. With that in mind, I open up the call dial screen on my phone before putting it in my pocket.

Part 11

The Western European restaurant, “Joseph”, is next to Kaguraoka Park. The street is lined with plane trees, and nicknamed Romantic Road. The large, dense trees form a 3 kilometre long tunnel of green. It’s my favourite street in Asahikawa. The log house-style restaurant doesn’t appear out of place amongst the churches, general stores, and cafes in the area.

There's a sign saying "Closed" hanging on the door, but I can still open it. It isn't locked.

"Did you forget somethi—"

I guess the air conditioning installer just left. The man appears to be moving a table back to where it belongs after moving it out of the way temporarily.

"Why…?"

Carpenter, or rather, Koshiko-san, looks like his father but with a gentler expression. He stares at us, and blinks.

"Ah, I'm so glad… I'm so happy you're safe…" Once again, tears spill from Kobamatsu-san's eyes. Koshiko-san grimaces.

"Everyone left, I was so worried…!" Kobamatsu-san crumbles to the floor, grabbing Koshiko-san's right hand.

Tears well up in Koshiko-san's eyes as he stands before Kobamatsu-san , whose face is red from his overflowing emotions. Just like that, the two of them quietly cry together. I look at Sakurako-san. Honestly, I can't imagine Koshiko-san being a bad person. However, Sakurako-san still has a grave expression. She walks through the store, looking for something.

Kobamatsu-san and Koshiko-san soon regain their composure, and let go of each other. Koshiko-san offers Kobamatsu-san a seat, then takes the seat next to him. I notice that his left hand is hurt, and wrapped in bandages.

"Seriously, why are you here?"

"I was looking for you," Kobamatsu-san says awkwardly as he wipes his face with a handkerchief. "When I heard the news, I got worried about whether everyone was okay."

"Ah… Sorry about that."

"It's fine… I'm just glad to see that you're well." Kobamatsu-san says, about to cry again. He looks around the store interior to compose himself.

Not only are there tree decals pasted on the walls, but there's also thin, pillar-like trees in pots placed around the restaurant. It feels like the middle of a forest. This shop has a really great atmosphere.

"So this is your store, huh?"

“I didn’t mean to lie, but someone else took the name ‘Chef’ first. I twisted the truth a little. I’m on a tight budget, so I made most of the interior myself. In a broad sense, carpenters and chefs are both craftsmen.” He tries to give us his excuses. Apparently he feels bad about calling himself Carpenter.

“Carpenter, huh… I see, did you get it from the name of your shop?” Sakurako-san says, peeking into the kitchen. She bursts out laughing. “Joseph... Husband of the Virgin Mary, and adoptive father of Jesus. He certainly was a carpenter.”

Koshiko-san has a puzzled expression on his face.

“So who are these people?” Koshiko-san whispers to Kobamatsu-san while staring at Sakurako-san and I.

“It’s a long story, but… These two knew ‘Chef.’ They helped me find you.”

“Oh… I see.”

I can tell that he doesn’t really get it. Koshiko-san scratches his head with a vague expression.

“Also, this boy saw the accident that Yamaguchi caused. He’s another person who can’t forgive what Yamaguchi did. But there’s no need to worry, he’s agreed to cooperate after hearing everything.”

“Everything? You told him about the others?!” Koshiko-san immediately looks angry.

“W-well…”

“We all promised never to tell anyone else!”

Kobamatsu-san covers himself with his arms. Koshiko-san looks exactly like his dad when he’s angry. I put my hands in my pockets.

“I needed to tell them because I’m worried about you! Yamaguchi is dead, Chef killed herself, and Preschool Teacher is missing!”

“What?” The anger immediately disappears from his face. He turns pale and has to sit down on a chair. “Preschool Teacher is safe, but… Chef killed herself? No way…”

“…These two are the ones who discovered her corpse.” Koshiko-san looks at me wide-eyed. “Gouro-san hanged herself in her apartment.”

“…” He puts his feet up on the chair and curls up in a ball.

“You really… Didn’t know?” Kobamatsu-san asks. Koshiko-san nods forcefully.

“…I didn’t know anything about the others, either.”

“You didn’t know anything? Even though you’re the one who helped Preschool Teacher move?” Sakurako-san laughs.

“That’s only because Doctor asked me to help Preschool Teacher move. They said it was in everyone’s best interest if I didn’t know anything… What’s going to happen with Gouro-san’s funeral?”

“It’s already over. None of the relatives wanted her ashes, so they’ll be kept at a shrine connected to my workplace for a year, then put into a mass grave,” Kobamatsu-san answers quietly.

Koshiko-san bursts into tears. His crying isn’t as intense as Kobamatsu-san’s, but his eyes are all red and his nose is running.

“Then… Can I at least pay my respects to her?”

“It’s just a pile of ashes, though,” Sakurako-san says after thoroughly searching the house.

“Sakurako-san!” That’s completely out of line, no matter how you look at it.

“More importantly, where did you get that cut?”

“Where…? I cut myself while cooking, obviously!” Koshiko-san responds with a click of his tongue.

Sakurako-san just laughs at him. “You cut your dominant hand?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m right handed.” Koshiko-san looks confused.

Kobamatsu-san says, “I don’t think I’ve seen him use his left hand, either…”

Sakurako-san walks over to where they’re sitting, and stabs a kitchen knife that she was hiding behind her back into the table.

“Eek! Kobamatsu-san flinches back.

“Look at this. Normal knives are shaped like a レ symbol, but this one is backwards.” Sakurako-san runs her finger down the back of the blade with a grin. “Basically, this knife is the opposite of a regular knife, meaning it’s meant for lefties to use. Why would you have this in your kitchen if you’re right handed?”

“You don’t have the right to interrogate me! You’re the one snooping around my store!” Koshiko-san yells.

I pull the knife out of the table and put it on the furthest part of the counter.

“Maybe he’s ambidextrous. It wouldn’t be strange for him to have different tools for different situations, right?”

“I’d like to hear it from him directly. If he really cut himself, why doesn’t he just show us the wound?” Sakurako-san says to Koshiko-san unwaveringly. She says it like it’s a challenge.

“Why do I have to do that?”

“Why are you hiding it? If you show us, this conversation can end right now. If you do, we’ll leave the store… Unless you have some reason you won’t show it?”

“Injuries are gross, they’re not really something you show other people.”

“I want to see it. If you aren’t lying, show me.”

“…”

The two of them glare at each other, holding their ground. Kobamatsu-san helplessly watches them, then taps on Koshiko-san’s upper arm.

“What if those two leave, and you just show me? I’ll help you redo the dressings,” Kobamatsu-san urges him.

Koshiko-san presses his lips together, like he’s pouting. He looks like he’s thinking hard about it.

“What’s wrong? You can’t even show him?” Sakurako-san says with a malicious grin.

Koshiko-san resolves himself, and unwraps the bandage. When I heard “wound,” I was imagining a fresh, open gash. However, what he reveals is a bruised, swollen fist.

“This is a cut from a kitchen knife?” Sakurako-san says, laughing. I can’t listen to her anymore, so I tug on her arm to remind her to be polite. “Why did you lie about it?” She asks, ignoring my signal for her to stop.

“I actually got hurt while bouldering! How pathetic would it be to tell people that I went out to play at a time like this and got hurt so I have to take time off work?! It’s embarrassing for a chef to let his hands get hurt!” Koshiko-san shouts.

Kobamatsu-san forces a smile, and shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it,” he replies.

“That’s not true.” Sakurako-san refutes immediately. I thought something felt off about his explanation, too.

“What?”

“That injury isn’t from bouldering. If it were just damage to the flexor tendon in your finger, how do you explain all this bruising?”

“Well, I crushed it…”

“Surely there was a ‘snap’ feeling, then, right?”

I’ve also gone bouldering a few times. There’s a climbing gym that does bouldering lessons in Shinseicho. The one who’s really into it is my mountain grandpa. Sometimes I go with him. The ‘snap’ feeling is the most feared injury amongst climbers. There’s actually an audible cracking sound. It’s hard to recover from. I’ve heard stories and seen other climbers with it, but I’ve never seen someone so bruised and swollen.

“Also, you should go to the hospital for that.” Sakurako-san sighs as if she’s made up her mind. “If it’s a bennett fracture… Well, you should probably prepare a different excuse to tell the doctor than the one you gave us.”

“A fracture…? H-he can’t go to the hospital!” Kobamatsu-san raises his voice in panic.

“It’s a fracture to the base of the first metacarpal. The discolouration is from the fracture bleeding into the surrounding skin. The joint at the base of your finger is broken, dislocated, or both. You have to be extremely careful when recovering from this type of fracture. It’s easy to make it worse, and there’s a high chance of after effects. It’s likely you’ll need surgery. It’s difficult to fix from the outside.” Sakurako-san grabs his hand to show us the bleeding on the back of his hand, then points to the base of his finger.

“After effects…?” Koshiko-san looks pale.

“An injury to a chef’s dominant hand is fatal. If you want to keep full use of it, you should go to the hospital immediately,” Sakurako-san says. She sits in an empty seat and crosses her legs. “Though it looks like you have somewhere you need to go more urgently than the hospital - the place where you got that injury. This usually

happens when someone falls while holding the handles on a bike or motorcycle… In other words, punching something with extreme force.” Sakurako-san adds, “it’s common during skiing season,” but I don’t think Koshiko-san is listening anymore.

His face is completely expressionless.

“It doesn’t look like you have any other injuries, so I don’t think you fell. Plus, if it was a bike accident, you wouldn’t have any reason to lie about it. The only explanation I can think of is…”

“He hit someone…? Like Yamaguchi?” Kobamatsu-san finishes Sakurako-san’s sentence.

Koshiko-san looks sad now. “…You’re right. I was furious. I’m not proud of it… But it wasn’t Yamaguchi. I punched a wall.”

“If it was just a wall, you would have said so from the beginning. Stop lying.”

“It really was just a wall! I’m just… Ashamed that I even wanted to hit a person.”

Even I think that’s an unreasonable explanation.

“If we wanted to turn you in to the police, we would have done it when we first heard your story from Kobamatsu. So tell us everything, that’s why we’re here. This guy wants to hear the truth, too.”

“But you’re not my friend. There’s no reason why I should tell you.” Koshiko-san glares at us.

“It’s ultimately up to you, but if things continue like this, we don’t have any reason not to go to the police.” Sakurako-san leans against her elbow on the table to show how relaxed she is.

I know she’s just trying to get a rise out of him. She wants to make him emotional so he messes up. But he’s still an imposing man. Not only is he in shape from mountain climbing, but I can tell by the muscles under his shirt that he does weight training, too.

“…I want to hear it, too. Please tell us what happened while I was gone.” Kobamatsu-san says timidly.

I couldn’t think of anything to say that could deescalate the situation, so I’m glad he spoke up.

“I don’t want to put the blame on anyone… I just want to know the truth. Why did she decide to take her own life? I couldn’t care less about Yamaguchi and the others.”

"…" Koshiko-san can't bring himself to look at Kobamatsu-san . He stares at the ground by his feet for a while with worry.

"Please. If you don't tell us… I won't be able to live with this guilt. If I had stopped those three back then, or if I hadn't suggested confining them at my place… She might still be alive today. All my regrets are driving me insane."

"Regrets are meaningless," Sakurako-san says coldly.

Kobamatsu-san forces a smile.

"It doesn't matter whether it has meaning or not… It's like having a thorn stuck in your finger. Even if you know it'll come out sooner or later on its own, most people will still try to pull it out."

I'm sure Sakurako-san genuinely thinks there's no point in wondering "what if," but there's still lots of people who can't help but worry about if they made the right choice. Even though they can't do it over again, they still look for a path without regrets and blame themselves for not choosing it.

"So please… Tell us what you know. Even if you think it'll hurt me, or if I'm better off not knowing. Nothing can be worse than leaving it up to my imagination." Kobamatsu-san bows his head. He kneels on the ground. Koshiko-san tells him to get up, but Kobamatsu-san keeps begging.

"I really don't know anything. All I did was help Preschool Teacher move. Chef wasn't there anymore when I got home. I asked Doctor what happened, but all he said was that she's in a safe place. I know just as much as you do," he mumbles, wrapping his arms around himself.

"Why did you guys even start this whole thing to begin with?"

"We knew from the beginning that what we were doing wasn't right, but we thought there wasn't any other way to go about it. We never wanted to do something bad, but we couldn't let them just get away with it."

"You didn't consider handing them over to the police?" I accidentally ask out loud.

It wouldn't be so bad if it was just theft. Yamaguchi was not a first time offender, his other crimes would definitely come out. I would assume his punishment would be quite a bit more severe this time.

“You could easily spread the word about him online. He would have been socially isolated, so it would be difficult for him to get a job, and he wouldn’t be able to live freely.”

“Yamaguchi wasn’t interested in getting a job, anyway. Social isolation would have no impact on him,” Koshiko-san says, clenching his teeth in anger. “Even if he got arrested, he wouldn’t receive the death penalty. He would get out eventually, and when he did, he’d go back to a life of crime. There isn’t a harsh enough penalty in Japan for that man! This country has limits on the penalties he can receive for his crimes!”

“But…”

“Some day, if he killed someone else, he might have been put to death. But only after more blood had been spilled. Are you really okay with that? If he got set free and killed someone important to you, would you really be fine with that?!”

“…”

What a cruel question. I can’t respond. Still, confining someone and causing their death is unforgivable. Even if I stood face to face with pure evil, I could never do what these people did.

“Tamotsu Koshiko… Why do you hate that man so much? Did you know one of his victims?” Sakurako-san asks, taking a leaflet off the counter and looking at Koshiko-san’s introduction paragraph.

“No, I have nothing to do with any of his victims.”

“Absolutely nothing?” Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow.

“Yeah. I’m completely unrelated to Yamaguchi, Irie, or any of their victims.”

Sakurako-san looks up from her leaflet. “I see. I finally understand the relationship between you, Doctor, and Rui Miki,” she says, looking at me with a big grin as if she’s satisfied with what she discovered. She turns back to Koshiko-san.

“Sakurako-san, um…”

“The first part that felt off about Kobamatsu’s story was when you met on that floodplain. He mentioned the names of the victim’s husband and child to show that he knew her, too. How did you know those names back then? The child’s name hasn’t been reported on the news.”

After all the work it took to get information about him, I understand exactly how little coverage Yamaguchi got in the news. The name of a child who wasn't directly related to the incident wouldn't have shown up anywhere. I don't think Koshiko-san is really "completely unrelated."

"The second thing that bothered me was that Miki's neighbours put a lot of worth into her sense of justice. That's not something people normally see in one's day to day life. You'd normally just say that she was a kind person, so what made her specifically mention Miki's sense of justice?" Sakurako-san holds up a finger for each point she makes. "And now, you say you had nothing to do with any of the victims, and you're completely unrelated to the matter. I've been trying and failing to figure out what connection you have. Why do this if you're 'unrelated?'"

"She has a point. Why would you kidnap someone for no reason?" I ask. Sakurako-san slowly shakes her head.

"You don't get it? They're all different ages, genders, in different lines of work, and they had no relation to the victims. There's only one reasonable explanation for that. It's a relationship they couldn't have unless they were completely unrelated to the case - jurors. You were all on the jury for Yamaguchi's trial."

"Jurors…" Kobamatsu-san gasps.

Yamaguchi's trial took place about half a year after the hit and run. That trial sentences him to 3.5 years - far too short for the crime he committed.

"When the jury candidates are chosen, they're given the details about the case, victim, and assailant. They have to look over it and state whether they're related to the case or not. I'm sure you would have seen the name of the victim's son in the materials you were given, or in court."

I looked it up later out of curiosity, and depending on how many days there are until the trial, dozens of candidates can be picked and shown the case details. It's the same regardless of if it's a crime the victim would want to keep secret or not, like rape. There's a risk of the victim's acquaintances or neighbours being chosen and finding out about the incident. I realise that it's an inevitable part of the justice

system, but I've been hearing about declining moral values lately, so it makes me wonder what some people do with the information…

"While members of the jury aren't allowed to talk about what happened during the trial, they can tell other people that they were chosen to be on the jury. Miki must have mentioned it to her neighbour, since they were close, and that's how her neighbour learned about her sense of justice."

The culprit was found guilty and imprisoned, but Miki-san wasn't satisfied with that. When her neighbour saw that, she must have thought Miki-san had an unusually strong sense of justice.

"None of you found the outcome of the trial to be favourable. You didn't think he was receiving a harsh enough punishment. You felt guilty about it, didn't you?" Sakurako-san lightly taps her finger against the table while she waits for Koshiko-san's response. He shakes his head, refusing to answer.

"You would never even consider confining and punishing someone who committed a crime you weren't connected to. During the trial, you saw how that man acted. You'll never forget how the bereaved family looked at him, will you? That's why all of you 'unrelated' people decided to become executioners. Or maybe you'll tell me that I'm completely off base?"

Koshiko-san doesn't say anything. He keeps his head down, staring at the floor in silence for a while. The store is dead quiet. All I can hear is my own breathing, and the faint noise of cars passing by outside.

"…That's not true." He finally speaks up. "It's not true. It wasn't that easy…" Koshiko-san covers his eyes with his right hand.

I desperately want to know what could push these people to act so violently. Kobamatsu-san isn't a bad person. I'm sure the man in front of me isn't bad, either. I want to know the reason and exact moment that caused them to change. It's just like when Phantom influences someone.

"That's the only thing I could think of. If I'm wrong, tell us what really happened."

"I have a duty of confidentiality. I'm not permitted to discuss the contents of the trial with anyone other than the other jurors."

“Then pretend we’re the other jurors.”

Koshiko-san sighs. “…Then prepare for a long story.”

“Keep it brief.”

Koshiko-san looks like he’s about to cry. Koshiko-san goes to the fridge and pours 4 glasses of apple flavoured sparkling water. “I’ll only talk until these get lukewarm,” he says.

Part 12

“It all started while I was helping at my dad's liquor store…”

After Koshiko-san opened his own restaurant, he still helped at his dad’s store to afford food expenses. The week before last - or the last week at the time of this story, there was an article about the restaurant in the newspaper. Koshiko-san had been so busy that he didn’t check if there was anything about it this week. He made a lot of mistakes because there were suddenly a lot more customers than usual. He worried about how many of those customers were actually satisfied with his service. His stomach hurt just thinking about if they would visit again,

One day, while he was wallowing in depression and anxiety, one of his regular customers came in. He was a middle aged man who ran a bar in the Sanroku district. Fortunately, a mama came in soon after him. The mama is the owner of a gay bar. The two acquaintances chatted while Koshiko-san sorted out sales slips. He suddenly heard them mention something about “an awful story.”

“I was grateful that he always bought a lot, but it’s complicated…” The mama said to Koshiko-san. “He frequents one of my other bars, and the manager there says he’s horrible.”

The mama apparently owned two bars in addition to the gay bar. Apparently there’s been a rude customer frequenting them lately. He kept starting fights with the other customers, and harassing the young women who work there. He’d stop right away if he was given a warning, so he wasn’t the worst customer to walk in. On the other hand, it doesn’t feel nice to know you’re serving someone like that.

“Apparently that guy killed someone in a hit and run, and so he was in prison for a few years.”

Ever since he got out, he'd been living off welfare, and just drank and gambled instead of getting a job.

"Apparently you meet all the qualifications for welfare once you get out of prison. It's called the comprehensive support fund, and it lets you borrow up to 100 000 yen per month for up to a year, interest free. As someone who works hard every day, it sounds ridiculous."

"If he got a job, he would have to start paying child support to his ex wife, so it's more profitable to just drink it away. Can you believe that?"

Then he convinced a young woman to go out with him and give him money. Koshiko-san started to think the world had gone mad. He had to work hard nonstop, and other people got to live like that? But if that was the end of it, he could have brushed it off as something that sounds nice until it happens to you.

"How can the government coddle criminals like this Yamaguchi guy?"

The moment he heard that name, Koshiko-san's mind went blank.

"I hadn't ever given the law much thought, and my life has been free of crime. I've never felt heartbroken over hearing about a stranger getting into an accident before. I only became a juror because I'd never done it before."

He didn't take it seriously at first. He just thought it sounded neat, and he could brag about it to people he knew, but after attending the trial, Koshiko-san changed his view. It was nothing to make light of. The man who had lost his beloved wife and their unborn child looked haggard. Losing one's partner is one of the most painful things someone can go through. He lost the person dearest to him because of the fault of another person.

But Kazuo Yamaguchi was a skilled conman. He knew exactly how to convince everyone that he'd reflected on his actions. He said he'd spend the rest of his life trying to make amends. It was obvious that he was lying. He never once apologised to the family of the woman he killed. But even knowing that, there's a fixed penalty and jail time for his crime. As long as there was no proof he was driving drunk, he couldn't be charged with manslaughter due to reckless

driving. Besides, there were people who believed what Yamaguchi said, and he had a child. He was given a lighter sentence on account of his child.

Koshiko-san always thought good and evil were absolute, so he was shocked that the justice system could be so ambiguous and lenient. The resulting sentence was only 3.5 years. The only silver lining was that he was given a prison sentence, rather than a suspended sentence.

“Why?! He killed a woman and her baby!”

“He took my wife from me, a daughter from her parents, and a mother from my child… And he only gets 3 and a half years? Do you think those two lives are worth that little?!” Koshiko-san can still hear the cries of the bereaved family when he falls asleep at night.

“After that, I thought about how I should live my own life as honestly as possible. I wanted to succeed in life, otherwise… The only ones winning would be scumbags like him.”

“But why did you imprison Yamaguchi?” Sakurako-san says in amazement.

He must be taking a break from running the restaurant, since it doesn’t smell like food at all here. Koshiko-san looks around the store and scowls, almost like he knows what I was just thinking.

“It’s because… She came. Preschool Teacher, Miki-san.”

One day, while Koshiko-san was throwing himself into his work, a lone woman arrived at his store. Miki-san brought flowers after hearing about how the restaurant had just opened from the newspaper. There were no other customers, and the restaurant was about to close, so the two of them opened a bottle of wine together. The last time they had talked, they were discussing Yamaguchi’s trial as members of the jury. They found that they enjoyed talking together in a more casual setting

Koshiko-san had been focusing so much on work that he hadn’t even gone out with his friends lately. He told her about how once his business was doing well, he’d like to start selling raclette, and visit Switzerland again… Before he even noticed, Miki-san was patiently listening to him while he talked all about himself.

“Oh yeah, there was also someone named Maki-san at the trial. Um, he said he was a doctor…”

“Oh, the serious looking guy?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. I ran into him the other day. I was working at the time, so we didn’t talk, but he nodded at me, so I think he remembers me. We should invite him next time.”

A few days later, Miki-san brought Doctor, Atsurou Maki, to the restaurant. Out of the 6 jurors, the 3 who wanted Yamaguchi to face a severe punishment were Koshiko-san, Miki-san, and Maki-san. For the remaining jurors, one claimed that the victim was equally at fault and thought it was “unfair” to sentence Yamaguchi. Another thought Yamaguchi had reflected on his actions and “forgave” him. The remaining juror thought that letting Yamaguchi go free would be in the best interest of his “child’s future.”

It was only for a short time, but Koshiko-san felt a connection with the other two who sided with him. It was painful for him to remember how the trial ended, but he also felt a nostalgic warmth.

Afterwards, Miki-san started visiting Koshiko-san’s restaurant once or twice a week. But one day, she suddenly stopped visiting. Koshiko-san felt lonely and worried after not seeing her for 2 weeks. When she eventually returned, she looked awfully depressed.

“Apparently a strange young man visited Miki-san at work. He dropped off an elementary school aged boy, and asked if they could look after him for around 3 days.”

“An elementary schooler?“

All the kids I saw at Rainbow♫ were either babies or very young toddlers. There could have maybe been kindergarteners, but an elementary schooler would look out of place.

“Apparently the man’s mother usually took care of his son, but she had suddenly fallen ill and was hospitalised. The man was actually his uncle. He didn’t have anyone to turn to, but he had a business trip that he couldn’t cancel.”

The man bowed his head and begged the staff to accept his request. The staff didn’t know what to do, so they called their boss. Rainbow♫, like a lot of childcare facilities, only cares for children 6 and under. The “first grade wall” is a hurdle many working parents

face. Although there are after school programs to look after them, they don't stay open until nighttime. A lot of parents have to take less shifts to make things work.

The boss said that they weren't able to keep the man's nephew for 3 days straight, but the man continued to bow. The man glanced up with unease, then looked at his nephew sadly. The boss tries to gently explain why they can't accommodate his request.

The man frantically tried to explain that the child's parents had both died, and the child's grandma was too sick to care for him, but the reality is that there are lots of children who have nobody to look after them. If the preschool made an exception for him, it wouldn't be fair to the countless other parents who had to give up work because they couldn't find someone to watch their children.

"But if I get turned away here… My only other option is to hire a stranger online. I don't know if an honest person will reply…"

Even if they're both strangers, it's a lot easier to leave your child at a childcare facility than with someone you met online. Especially with some of the things you see on the news these days. But what can't be done, can't be done. The staff members started to get annoyed.

"Please, it's just one kid… This boy's mother, my sister…. Was killed in a hit and run, along with the baby she was carrying… My brother in law took his own life, because he couldn't handle it. I swore that I would protect and raise the child they left behind."

At that moment, Miki-san realised that the boy in front of her was Shuuto-kun. She noticed that he had the same eyes as the late Takahashi-san. Miki-san thought it was fate that brought him there. She knew she had to take responsibility herself. She started begging her boss to let her take care of the boy. She promised to work for 3 days straight to take care of him. Naturally, her boss refused at first.

"Actually… I was chosen to be a juror a few years ago, before I started working here."

After saying just that much, her boss could guess what happened. After giving it some thought, the boss decided to make a one-time exception. Two days later, the boy went to stay at Rainbow♫. It was too far away from his school, so he was given a 3

day break. He had a lot of homework, though. Miki-san was worried that the boy would act out because of everything that had happened to him, but he took care of the other children and helped around the facility. The other staff members weren't keen on him at first, but they quickly softened up when they saw how kind he was.

The days passed by quickly. After working for 48 hours straight, one of Miki-san's co workers forced her to take a break. Besides that, she worked for the entire 3 days. But it wasn't hard for her. She actually enjoyed it. But every time she saw the boy's face, she felt immense guilt because she couldn't save his father from the grief that ended his life. Before bed each night, Miki-san would sit the boy on her lap and read a picture book to him. She bought a book for him before he arrived. His uncle said that he loved animals and visiting the zoo, so she decided to get "The Lion Library." I've heard of that book, too.

It's a story about a lion who loved books that suddenly appeared in a library. He was well loved in the library, but one day, he had to break a rule because of his kindness. Since everyone loved the lion so much, he was welcomed back to the library. It's a nice book about how rules are important, but it's also important to think about why those rules are in place. Sometimes you have to break the rules for the people you love.

"When she read to Shuuto-kun, all she could think about was how hard it must have been on his mom to leave such a sweet kid behind and not be able to see him anymore. No matter how much she cries and begs, she'll never be able to touch or hold her child again."

After 3 days, Shuuto-kun apologised to Miki-san for making her take care of him, and that he was fine to be alone for a while if she needed a break. He said he was used to going to the convenience store alone to use the microwave. Miki-san cried and hugged him for a long time.

After the third day, Shuuto-kun's uncle came to pick him up. He was genuinely worried about his nephew, even though he's a constant reminder of his sister. Miki-san researched childcare

services for him while she was working. Still, she was worried about how long the man would be able to keep raising a child on his own.

“Her boss told her to think of all her work as a way to make up for the outcome of the trial, but it just wasn’t possible for her. No matter how much anyone tries to convince us that it wasn’t our fault, it’s not something you can just forget about.”

If Yamaguchi had been given a harsher sentence, Shuuto-kun might not have lost his father.

“We all did our best. The presiding judge did, too. But it’s a matter of national law. How are you supposed to explain to Shuuto-kun that it’s the country’s fault that he lost his father, and there’s nothing anyone could do about it?”

“…”

There’s no way to answer that. Yamaguchi had no idea how everyone else felt, because the law was protecting him. There’s an overwhelming evil in this world. Even knowing that, there is nothing I can do about it. Why not? I want to know why the system is unjust. In reality, lions aren’t allowed in the library. Just listening to Koshiko-san and Miki-san’s stories has me feeling exhausted and cynical.

Kobamatsu-san sighs and leans into the back of his chair. Sakurako-san’s expression hasn’t changed, but I can tell she feels uncomfortable. I can tell because she’s tapping her toes rhythmically, like the tail of an angry cat.

“About a month after that, she brought Maki-sensei to my store. He said he wanted to come by and talk about Yamaguchi with us.” He takes a sip of his Appletiser, before continuing. “He was the one who tried to save Shuuto-kun’s father’s life.”

Part 13

Sometimes terrible coincidences line up just right to tear peoples’ hearts apart. Shuuto-kun’s father was so depressed that he couldn’t leave his house or go to work. Eventually, he was fired from the company he worked at. That one just one more problem to add to the pile. Additionally, Yamaguchi was just about to be released from prison. That, on top of everything else, left him very unstable. That

morning, Shuuto-kun discovered his father lying on the living room floor, collapsed after ingesting a large amount of sleeping pills.

“He said it was the first time in his life that he seriously prayed to God. He asked Takahashi-san’s wife, who is in Heaven, to protect her husband. But unfortunately, his wish didn’t come true.”

The physician, Atsuro Maki-sensei, eventually had to declare that poor man dead.

“He wanted to just run away when the time came to break the news to the family. He blamed himself for failing to protect the people around Shuuto-kun twice. However, Shuuto-kun said ‘it’s not your fault, doctor,’ through tears.”

We don’t have any relation to the boy, other than through Koshiko-san, but just thinking about everything he went through makes me want to cry. Koshiko-san sniffles. Despite being silent, Sakurako-san’s brow is deeply wrinkled.

Maki-sensei said before, “he’s still so small, but he already knows how powerless people are against the cruel world. No child should have to go through that. That’s the kind of thing you should only have to face when you’re an adult. Children should get to see the world as a bright, brilliant place.”

That resonated with Miki-san. Koshiko-san says he could feel an invisible flame burning in the two of them. Maki-san in particular detests the laws of Japan. When he gets drunk, he always says things like, “someone has to do something” and, “things can’t stay like this.”

I understand how he feels, it takes more than just one person to be that “someone.” Koshiko-san could feel the difference between the positions of himself and Maki-san.

“A week went by. The shop had already closed and I was putting in a shelf when she came running in.” Koshiko-san points at a nearby shelf with photos of Swiss mountains. He takes a deep breath. “She said she saw Yamaguchi. She looked really upset.”

It happened in the underground walkway in Midorigaoka. She was in the salon where her friend works across the street from a grocery store. Since there were no other customers, Miki-san and the owner were chatting. Before she knew it, it was already after 10pm.

There weren't many other people out, so her friend said they would walk home together after she closed up the store. While she was waiting outside, Miki-san heard a woman scream.

"At first she didn't know where it came from. The voice sounded really urgent, saying "stop" and "no," begging for help. She looked around, and finally found that it was coming from the underground walkway."

However, just because you know someone is in trouble doesn't mean you have the courage to help them alone. She looked around to see if there was anyone else nearby. She saw two people running away from the opposite exit. Under the streetlight she could see someone who was a bit chubby, kind of old, and wearing all black with a mask covering his face, but Miki-san knew instantly. She could recognize that horrible man anywhere, no matter how much he tried to hide.

Then, from the nearby exit, a woman came staggering up the stairs with her face covered in blood. The woman told her through tears that she had been beaten by a man and a woman who stole her bag. Miki-san left the woman with her friend, and headed straight to Kosiko-san's place. She hadn't told the police that Yamaguchi was the culprit yet.

"I said 'what are you talking about?' but I understood how she felt. She wanted to call Maki-sensei to the store and catch Yamaguchi."

There were several other robberies in the Midorigaoka area. He was probably familiar with the area. Miki-san said she'd be the decoy on the flood plain that night. When Yamaguchi attacked her, the other two would catch and restrain him.

"I told her that I knew how she felt, but we couldn't just take revenge like that. She argued that he'll never be properly punished unless we did what she said. 'We'll lock him up and torture him until he promises to never commit another crime again. We'll control him with fear,' she said."

Koshiko-san thought she was insane, and was going to tell her there's no way he's doing that, but… Maki-sensei agreed to help. If it didn't go well, Miki-san would be in a lot of danger. Even if he told the

police and they caught Yamaguchi, he would just be let go again. Yamaguchi just gambled and drank all his money away, and chose to rob people instead of getting a job. He'd already been arrested before, and that still wasn't enough to change him.

Maki-sensei and Miki-san planned to capture Yamaguchi, and make him pay for his crimes. Koshiko-san was on the fence, but eventually agreed to help because he was angry at Yamaguchi, and didn't want the other two to get hurt.

"Besides, I didn't think it would go according to plan. We carefully planned our strategy, and waited on the flood plain for several nights waiting for Yamaguchi to show up. It was kind of fun, like we were in a spy movie."

On the fifth night that the group waited on the flood plain, Yamaguchi finally appeared. Using a modified instant camera to stun them and some good teamwork, they actually managed to capture Yamaguchi and Irie. That's also when they met Kobamatsu-san and Gouro-san.

"You already know everything that happened after that." Koshiko-san looks at Kobamatsu-san .

We already know all about their strange cohabitation.

"…Honestly, I didn't want any of this, but it was too late to turn back."

Miki-san and Maki-san must have noticed that Koshiko-san's heart wasn't in it, since their anger was much, much stronger than his.

"Deep down… I'm relieved. Everyone has things they have to do. My things are working hard and taking care of my parents."

It's his parents who'll suffer if Koshiko-san's life is ruined by Yamaguchi. He'd lose everything. I don't blame him for betraying his friends.

"But a few days later, those two suddenly showed up asking me to help Preschool Teacher move. Doctor said that if I helped, they would stay out of my life forever. I asked why I had to help, but they didn't answer."

I have a vague idea of what might have happened and why she had to move. He knew he had to help protect her.

“So how do you explain what happened to your hand?”

“It was when we were parting ways. After we finished moving her, I asked them what happened, and why they left me. He said, ‘I realised that it would have been better if it had just been the three of us.’ I exploded with anger. Before I knew it, I was punching a telephone pole.”

That was his only excuse, after putting everyone in danger? Koshiko-san’s anger is directed at Maki. His “perfect plan” would have failed anyway.

“But at the same time, I felt like I was the one who abandoned them. My situation is. different from Undertaker- or Kobamasu-san. I knew where they worked, so I could have contacted them at any time. I simply chose not to.”

Most of all, he couldn’t forgive himself, and ended up hurting his hand like that. He looks down at his deep blue left hand again.

“Let’s put a new bandage on,” Kobamatsu-san says sympathetically.

“Where did Doctor go after that?”

“I don’t know. He looked really exhausted, though. He was saying something about everything falling apart, and how nothing will change.”

“Then the burnt corpses of Yamaguchi and Irie were found on the morning that Gouro-san committed suicide. Do you think those two know something?”

Sakurako-san presses her forehead against her tented fingers and groans.

“Yeah, but I don’t know how to contact them anymore. Maki-sensei suddenly quit his job, and nobody was home when I tried to visit Miki-chan’s new house.”

“Let’s… go to the police already,” Kobamatsu-san mutters while wrapping a bandage around Koshiko-san’s hand.

“Let’s leave the rest to the police. They can look for those two. We’ve been trying to do too much. I just wanted to do the right thing, but killing people for any reason isn’t okay.”

“But… Won’t your sentence be lighter if you all turn yourselves in together?”

From what I've heard so far, I don't think any of them are entirely bad people. It feels somehow absurd that now they're going to be charged because of Yamaguchi.

"Those two might not be able to turn themselves in anymore," Sakurako-san says with resolve.

Kobamatsu-san and Koshiko-san lower their heads. I almost wish Phantom was the culprit this time. I can't bear looking at those two right now. If it was Phantom's fault, I'd know the culprit was a bad person. Good people wouldn't have died over this.

The abandoned house where Yamaguchi burned to death was *that* place. Phantom could have burned it down to destroy evidence. But that house was also in the news after the case with the three "sisters." It was a secret before, but now anyone could find it. If you search "Asahikawa abandoned buildings," it shows up near the bottom of the first page of results. It wouldn't be strange for Yamaguchi and Irie to choose it as a hiding spot. The police didn't think anything was odd, either. Maki-san and the others could have also brought them there to kill them. Phantom doesn't necessarily have to be involved.

"Oh yeah." Kobamatsu-san looks like he suddenly remembered something. "Tomorrow is the anniversary… Of the day Takahashi-san died in that accident."

Sakurako-san mutters, "really?" then suddenly gets up from her chair. "Boy, what would you do? If you were Doctor, a man disgusted with the legal system who tortured two people in an attempt to make them change their ways and accidentally killed them… What would you do after that?"

"I… Umm…"

There aren't many choices. Run away, turn yourself in, or kill yourself.

"From the impression I got, I don't think he's the type of person to run away. That leaves turning himself in, or suicide. I think that by quitting his job, he was getting his affairs in order. He might be taking his time trying to muster up the courage to take that final step, though…" Sakurako-san suddenly looks at Kobamatsu-san and Koshiko-san.

“I think he might be waiting for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re running out of time. He said ‘someone has to do something,’ right? If he’s ready to die, there’s one thing left that he can do to make a change.”

“…You don’t mean...” A chill runs up my spine from the thoughts that spring into my head.

“There’s somewhere I’d like to visit, so we can verify if I’m right,” Sakurako-san says, taking out her car key.

“What weighs most heavily on Miki and Maki’s hearts is Shuuto Takahashi. If he’s serious about ending his own life, I’m sure he’ll visit Shuuto at some point.”

“That’s it! I can get the address! It should still be in the record from the funeral.” Kobamatsu-san leans forward with excitement, and takes out his phone.

“No,” Koshiko-san says. “He’s already moved out of that house… You can’t raise a child in the house where his father died after all, right? He’s living in an apartment in the city with his uncle and grandma right now,” Koshiko-san says, heading toward the cash register. He unlocks the register, and takes a piece of paper out from under the tray. “…We talked about doing something if that boy was ever in serious trouble.”

Fortunately, Miki-san found the new address. I check the clock. It’s already after 5pm. I feel bad dropping in on them this late, but this can’t wait until tomorrow. Koshiko-san seems a bit hesitant about meeting Shuuto-kun, but he quickly steels himself. His Excellency Diavel’s singing resounds as we get into Sakurako-san’s car.

Part 14

Shuuto-kun lives in a 9 storey apartment building in Kawabata. It’s close to the elementary school, supermarket, and a drug store. It seems like a really convenient place to live. When we find the room and ring the intercom, we’re met with a clearly suspicious voice.

“Um… What do you want?”

I’m not even sure how to answer that. We all glance at each other for a moment until Sakurako-san pushes Kobamatsu-san in

front.

“What? Me?” Kobamatsu-san’s eyes dart around. “Excuse me, we’ve met before. I’m Kobamatsu, I assisted with the funeral at Suzuran,” he says into the intercom.

After some hesitation, the owner of the house unlocks the door. I’m sure he’s wondering why the man from the funeral home would be visiting.

“Um, so what is it?”

The homeowner is a young man in his twenties. He’s probably the uncle.

“It’s already been 5 years since then… I heard your mother has been ill recently. How is she doing?”

“Thank you for all you did back then. There were so many people there, I don’t think we could have handled it alone… My mom is fine, though. She just hurt her back.” The man is polite, even though he clearly doesn’t remember Kobamatsu-san .

Sakurako-san decides that their conversation is taking too long, so she forces her foot in the door to keep it open.

“Have you had any strange visitors in the last few days?”

“W-who are you?!”

“My background is none of your business. We’re not here to hurt you. Just answer the question.”

I think saying that we won’t hurt him makes us look more suspicious. The man looks confused and frightened.

“I’ll tell them,” a voice says from behind the man at the door.

The man steps out of the apartment. An older woman appears behind him; she’s probably Shuuto-kun’s grandma.

“We did have an unexpected visitor the other day. Could that be who you’re talking about?”

“Was it the doctor who treated the boy in your care?”

“…”

The woman just says, “move your foot, I’ll unlock the door.” She closes the door and undoes the chain, then opens it again. “Did you come here to discuss something about Maki-sensei?”

“Yes, he’s our friend. We’re… Looking for him,” Kobamatsu-san says.

"…I thought something was strange," the woman mutters. "He showed up out of the blue saying weird things. Good thing I didn't let him in. I was thinking of talking to the police about it." The woman urges us to go inside.

"We won't be staying long," Sakurako-san says.

"I won't bother bringing any tea, then. It'll bother the neighbours if we talk out here, so at least come inside," the woman says before she disappears into the house.

I guess there's no way around it, then. The uncle still clearly has no idea who we are. He's standing by the phone at the entrance to the living room, just in case anything happens. There's a boy on the couch holding a tablet, looking at us curiously. He's wearing a shirt with a ferocious T-Rex on it. He looks a little nervous about adults he's never met before suddenly showing up at the house.

"You can use a tablet? That's amazing," I say. The boy, Shuuto-kun, pauses for a moment before giving a humble smile.

"It's for learning. Sometimes my uncle lets me play games, though."

"Yeah? What kind of games?"

"You erase monsters with your finger. My uncle spends lots of money on the gacha."

"Don't tell them that," the young man says sulkily.

Shuuto-kun grins. He's clearly an intelligent, yet shy, boy. Seeing that smiling face makes me feel like I could understand why Miki-san and Maki-san did such horrible things.

"Look at this," The grandma says, bringing out a small duffel bag.

"He suddenly brought over this bag and said, 'there will be some trouble, so please leave your home for a while.' Inside of it was something for Shuuto."

Based on the sound when she placed it on the table, it's something quite heavy,

"At a glance, it's a book and game software. But to give us this when the date of my daughter's death is coming up… I think the doctor feels responsible for what happened to Shuuto-kun's father.

The part that bothers me is when he said ‘everything is done now’.” The grandma crosses her arms and sighs.

“Honestly, I thought it was strange, but he looked so serious that I didn’t feel like I could refuse. But…” She pats the outside of the bag. “When I took a closer look later, I noticed that there’s money underneath. Six million yen. I can’t accept that much. I don’t know his contact information, and when I tried to call the hospital they said he’d moved, so I’m at a loss.”

The grandma looks perplexed, like she has no idea why Maki-san would do something like that.

“Back then, there wasn’t anything the doctor could have done…” She says quietly so her grandson doesn’t hear. She must be talking about how he couldn’t save Shuuto-kun’s father.

“No… Please take it,” Koshiko-san, who had been silent until now, says in a low voice. “He definitely wants you to have it.”

“But…”

“He still doesn’t think it’s enough to atone for what he’s done. He did everything he could so he could give that to you.”

“Atone?” The grandma asks, puzzled.

Koshiko-san turns his gaze upward, and takes a deep breath to prepare himself. “To tell you the truth, I’m not exactly his friend. I met Maki-sensei 5 years ago during a trial.”

After taking a moment to fully comprehend those words, the grandma and uncle both gasp.

“Yes… That’s right. I felt like I’d seen both you and him before.”

The grandma puts her hand over her mouth as she begins to cry. The uncle is wearing a very stern expression. I don’t know whether he’s angry or sad.

“Back then, I couldn’t help you… I’m so sorry!” Koshiko-san falls to his knees, and bows deeply.

It makes for an incredibly tragic, hopeless, yet peculiar scene. Why does he feel like it’s all his fault? What did he have to endure during the trial? He did nothing wrong, yet he’s on the floor, asking for forgiveness. The reality of it is heartbreaking.

“It’s not your fault, mister. It’s all because of the guy who ran over mom.” A youthful voice comes from the living room. “But the

doctor kept apologising… Even though I'm not mad at him." Shuuto-kun gets up off the couch, looking unhappy.

"Yeah, he kept apologising to you, even though you didn't want him to. He completely disregarded your feelings. Adults can be pretty silly." Sakurako-san pats Shuuto-kun on the head.

"As he said, you should take the money, then leave the house for a few days. Maki might be involved with Yamaguchi's death"

"…"

The grandma and uncle look concerned. I'm sure they already had a feeling he was involved.

"You should take the kid and leave before the journalists find you. Why not go on a trip?"

"Why do we have to run away?" The uncle says defiantly.

"Because you're the victims."

"That makes even less sense!"

"It makes perfect sense. People listen to stories of other peoples' misfortune to make themselves feel better about their peaceful lives. It also gives them a definite evil to feel angry about. They speak poorly of mass media for prying into the lives of the victims, but also seek out the stories they complain about."

"…"

The uncle silently bites his lips. There's no good response to that.

"But Maki doesn't want that to happen, so he gave you money to escape with. A trip is a nice change of pace, too. You can make memories with the kid."

Still, the uncle has to work, and Shuuto-kun has to go to school. It's not as easy for regular people as it is for Sakurako-san, who doesn't have to worry about obligations like that. I definitely don't want them to be harassed by journalists, though.

"Is there a place you want to visit? Even without a passport, you can visit basically anywhere in Japan." Sakurako-san asks Shuuto-kun.

He stares back at her with a puzzled expression. He stares at his grandma until she sighs and nods.

"…Fukui, then. I wanna go to Fukui."

“Fukui! Are you interested in the prefectural dinosaur museum? I went there before, it was amazing! They have 43 complete dinosaur skeletons, and the Dino lab even has real Tyrannosaurus rex foot bones you can touch! You could spend 3 whole days there and never get bored!”

“Really? I wanna go!”

Sakurako-san looks just as excited as Shuuto-kun. The grandma and uncle sigh and promise that they’ll make it work.

“Can we go?! When are we going?!”

Sakurako-san turns to look at the grandma.

“You should leave as soon as possible. We’re looking for Maki, but we don’t know what he’ll do.”

Tomorrow is the anniversary of Shuuto-kun’s mother’s death. The day this whole tragedy started.

“Then we’ll leave for Sapporo today. Go get ready.”

“Hooray!”

Shuuto-kun jumps on the couch in excitement a few times before getting his dinosaur themed backpack and filling it with toys.

“…My father had a second family, and my mother treated me like I didn’t exist. Luckily I have my uncle, and someone who is like a grandma even though she’s not related to me by blood. I’ve never felt unhappy with my situation, because I’ve always been loved,” Sakurako-san says to the uncle, who looks deeply troubled over the sudden trip.

He nods with a lonely smile.

“I love Shuuto, so… Please stop the doctor. Once Shuuto grows up, there will come a day when he learns about this incident. He would be devastated if someone got hurt because of him.”

“He’s blinded by his fixation on justice. There’s a fine line between being an ideologist and insanity. It’s absolutely not that boy’s fault. He’s punishing himself for not being perfect enough to save everyone,” Sakurako-san says coldly.

Is that really true? Even if most people act for their own gain, we all have moments where we act in desperation for someone else’s sake. Regardless, there’s no doubt that Maki-sensei is in a dangerous situation.

We're all feeling helpless as we leave Shuuto-kun's house. By the time we get back to the car, it's already after 7pm. Despite the situation, Sakurako-san urges me to head home. I'll just feel anxious and dissatisfied if I go home, but Sakurako-san insists. I feel annoyed, so I change the audio from her music player to the radio. It's fine, I'm just a child anyway. The atmosphere in the car is heavy.

"At the very least… I hope he's safe,"

Kobamatsu-san mutters to himself while looking up at the dark blue sky and orange ridge line along the mountains from the remaining sunlight.

"The doctor probably asked them to take the child away from the house because he's anticipating the worst case scenario. That man is so intoxicated by 'justice' that he wants his death to make the news so he can be a scapegoat for change in the country."

"But…"

I don't want to think about it, but that must be true. If he just wanted to commit suicide, there would be no reason to keep Shuuto-kun away. Thinking about what he'd do to attract attention… Makes me uneasy.

"Maybe he's just thinking about turning himself in? Yamaguchi is already dead, so the topic around the incident will come to the surface again."

"Then why is he taking his time? Of course there's a chance he won't do anything, but we should prepare for the worst."

"The worst…?" Kobamatsu-san asks Sakurako-san, though his sorrowful expression says he doesn't really want to hear the answer.

"If he's really planning to use his suicide to create a stir, he needs to set a clear message. He will execute himself in a way that makes everyone understand."

Maki, with his resentment for Yamaguchi's crimes and displeasure with this country's laws, will stake his life on this.

"…The scene of the accident," I mutter with a bitter sigh.

"In that case… He'll probably choose the same time as well as location of the accident, right? At the place where this chain of misfortune began."

It all happened at dusk on that day, five years ago.

“I think so, too,” Sakurako-san says, nodding.

Kobamatsu-san covers his face with both hands and lowers his head.

“…Shouldn’t we stop this?” Koshiko-san, who has been reclined in the back seat looking completely exhausted, mumbles a few words while gazing at the streetlights outside.

“He’s… Doing everything in his power to accomplish his goal. Are we really qualified to stop him?”

“If we don’t do it, who will?” Sakurako-san asks coldly.

“Well…” Koshiko-san hesitates for a moment. “He’s trying to do everything on his own. Miki-chan was the first one to bring it up, but I don’t think she thought it was really possible. He’s the one who turned the plan into reality. I think he feels responsible for that.”

Kobamatsu-san doesn’t respond to Koshiko-san for a while. He’s at a loss for words. No, maybe he just doesn’t feel like he can trust anyone right now.

“Then… Are you going to pin all the blame on Maki-san?”

“That’s not what I meant! We were just following along, doing what he said. He even abandoned us in the end! As long as these two keep quiet, we can go back to our regular lives. We don’t have to give up our families or jobs.”

“So you want to just throw him under the bus…?” Kobamatsu-san is filled with anger, but I can see a hint of disappointment in his eyes.

“Then, do you think we would have gotten together and killed Yamaguchi if Maki-sensei hadn’t been there? If he hadn’t led us, Yamaguchi wouldn’t have died,” Koshiko-san says in a trembling voice, his face pale and eyes bloodshot.

Kobamatsu-san stares at the floor, like he’s unable to look at Koshiko-san. Before long, he shakes his head several times, and lets out a short sigh.

“…I see. You might be right. I know you’re worried about your parents, too.”

Koshiko-san looks relieved at Kobamatsu-san’s words of affirmation.

“However,” Kobamatsu-san continues. “For better or for worse, I don’t have my parents anymore. You can do whatever you want, I won’t stop you. But I’m going to atone for the crimes I committed with him. I have to honour Gouro-san, who chose to stay quiet and end her own life.”

“No, you don’t get it. She didn’t want anyone to find out, so she took the secret to her grave!” Koshiko-san raises his voice.

The sight of her dying alone without leaving a suicide note, but with the curry she promised to make sitting on the stove, is burned into my mind.

“Then I can’t let her take all the blame for it.”

“No, that’s not true. For both her sake and yours, you should just forget about this long nightmare we’ve been stuck in!”

In contrast to Koshiko-san’s agitation, Kobamatsu-san seems like he’s completely resolved himself.

“No… It wasn’t a nightmare for me. That time is important to me, even though it turned out like *this.* It wasn’t a nightmare… But I still want to be sincere with both Gouro-san, and Maki-san.”

Sakurako-san lets out a huge, fed-up sigh. “Ridiculous. There’s no point in talking about meaning. That woman is already a pile of ashes.”

As much as I hate it, I want to tell them that the dead don’t “want” anything. I don’t want to add to the chaos, though.

“Sakurako-san.” I touch her upper arm.

“No, there is meaning,” Kobamatsu-san says clearly. “There’s plenty of meaning to it. So you think that just because someone is gone, nothing they did matters?”

“…What?” Sakurako-san blinks.

“Wondering what someone would think… it doesn’t matter if they’re there or not. The things that are important to someone are the same, whether they’re alive or dead.”

Sakurako-san looks like she’s about to argue, but then closes her mouth with a displeased expression. Maybe she isn’t sure what to say. I’ve always felt uncomfortable with her view of death, so I’m really happy to have someone put it into words.

“…That’s just for your own self-satisfaction,” Sakurako-san says in a sulky voice, then goes back to being silent for a while.

That’s right, I’m no different. Whether she’s by my side or far away, my feelings toward Sakurako-san don’t change. Even if it’s just self-satisfaction, or even if we never meet again.

Part 15

If I had just a little more confidence in my own sense of “justice,” I’d call the police right now and turn them in. But right now, I can’t just consider them “bad guys” arbitrarily. I want to have respect for their decisions, too. It’s true that they broke the law, however, Yamaguchi’s existence has been smouldering inside of me, as well. I can’t help but wonder what I would have done if I had been part of their group.

Kobamatsu-san’s desire is to somehow convince Maki-sensei to turn himself in to the police with everyone. Of course, if Miki-san is still alive, he’d like to hear her thoughts, too. She might not want to turn herself in, like Koshiko-san. However, for this to happen, they would have to rewrite the scenario where everyone confined Yamaguchi and Irie without them in a way that the police will accept.

That’s why we need to talk to Maki-sensei. I also at least want to hear why Gouro-san felt like she had to commit suicide. Maybe that’s the real reason I’m hoping he’s safe. Koshiko-san says he wants to just forget about it already. He wants to go back to his everyday life. His memories of the days he spent with everyone terrify him. Kobamatsu-san says there’s no other way.

After visiting Shuuto-kun’s apartment, I went home and spent the evening the same way I always do. But at night, I can’t sleep. While I was lying in bed, Kobamatsu-san was busy running around. He got Maki-san and Miki-san’s addresses from Koshiko-san, so he was visiting their workplaces and last known addresses to find any clues to where they could be. I don’t know what Sakurako-san was up to.

At 9am the next day, we met up with each other. I had high hopes, but Koshiko-san is nowhere to be seen. Kobamatsu-san tries to put on a brave face, but I can tell he’s sad. We don’t know where Maki-san went after he visited Shuuto-kun, but judging by the timing,

he probably visited the hospital beforehand. Apparently he gave a letter to one of his coworkers, asking that they give it to his ex-wife if anything happened to him.

We found out that he got divorced 7 years ago, and hadn't seen his son since he was 2 years old. He had a long, hard struggle in court, but he wasn't given custody. His ex-wife got remarried right away, and wouldn't let him see his son because it would "confuse him." Maybe that's why he's so attached to Shuuto-kun, and why he hates the legal system so much.

One of Maki-san's doctor friends gave us his number, but warned us that he never picks up no matter how much they call him. Even if he doesn't answer, we know he hasn't cancelled the contract yet.

"I tried calling, too, but no dice," Kobamatsu-san says, disappointed.

We chase after any clue we can find from morning to evening, but we still haven't seen any sign of Maki-sensei. I regret not going to the police when I first thought of it. I didn't think Maki-sensei would involve anyone else's lives in his mission, since he devoted his life to medicine to help others. I hadn't even realised why Sakurako-san was being so cooperative with this case. I'm an idiot. It was stupid for me to think Sakurako-san was helping for my sake.

Even just a minute feels agonising while I sit through boring classes. I watch a flock of crows fly through the orange sky. After this, all that's left is to wait for him at the scene of the accident. The crossroad just past the supermarket. It's been 5 years. There isn't a single trace of the accident. Hardly anyone even remembers it happening. There are two white bouquets sitting by the utility pole at the crossroad.

"Where do you think he'll do it? And how?"

"I don't know, but it will definitely be something that will make a statement." Sakurako-san shakes her head as she watches the stream of cars drive by.

"I wonder if he'll use a car…" Kobamatsu-san mutters.

“You think he’ll drive his car into the spot where the accident happened?”

“One wrong move could cause a lot of damage,” Sakurako-san says, holding her arms.

The scene of the accident is a residential area, dotted with cram schools and beauty salons. It looks like a nice area to live in, but the apartment across from me looks like it has a lot of vacant rooms. There aren’t a ton of pedestrians walking by, but it’s not like it’s desolate. There’s a mother with her kids, a group of middle or high school kids hanging out, and an elderly couple pushing a shopping cart along. There’s a woman walking a white dog that looks like a Samoyed, but more slender. She looks at me as she walks by- no, she must have been looking at the flowers by the utility pole. She must be wondering why someone left flowers there. Her phone rings in her pocket, and she immediately loses interest in the bouquet.

“…”

“Sakurako-san?”

Sakurako-san snickers while she watches the woman with the dog.

“…I see, a phone call…”

“What!”

“Kobamatsu, you said your call went through, right?”

Kobamatsu-san is startled that she suddenly spoke to him, but he nods. “Yes, the call went to voicemail…”

I realise what she’s getting at. “I get it… His ringtone!”

“Exactly. It might be set to vibrate, but if we can hear his ringtone, we’ll know if he’s nearby.”

Kobamatsu-san takes out his phone with a tense expression. He must have tried calling countless times already. He opens his call history and tries one more time. I can hear a faint beep before the ringing starts.

“…”

All three of us silently focus on listening. I try as hard as I can to pick up the sound of a phone ringing. I usually don’t notice the ambient noise of the city, but it’s oppressively loud right now.

“It went through, but I didn’t hear anything.” Kobamatsu-san hangs up the phone dejectedly.

I check the clock, there’s less than 15 minutes until the time of the accident.

“Keep calling. Keep calling so it keeps ringing.”

There’s no time. We split up to search for him. There’s not much longer until sunset. The same time as that day is approaching. Back then, my brother held my hand when I was scared, but I’m on my own now. I’m not a child anymore. I clench my fists to drive away the vague anxiety I’m feeling.

The other two have moved a bit away from the scene. It’s my job to search this area. I focus all my attention on desperately listening for a ringtone. The streetlights start to turn on as time steadily marches on. Soon, light begins to spill from the windows of the surrounding houses.

“It’s strange. Seeing the lights from outside like this, everyone looks the same even though they’re totally different people.” I suddenly recall those words that my mom told me.

It’s true. From outside, they all look the same. Each person inside is a unique individual with their own thoughts. I feel an odd, sentimental stinging in my chest.

Suddenly, something catches my eye in a second story window of an apartment. The middle room doesn’t have curtains on the windows. At first I thought it was vacant, but there’s no real estate agent’s notice on the window. When I look closer, I can see the remains of tape as if there was a notice that was taken down. The only reason I can see the tape is because of the dim light coming from inside. It’s not the room lights that are on, though, but something like a small lamp with an orange glow.

“…No curtains…”

With nothing covering the windows, I can peek into the empty room. The rooms to the left and right are also empty with a vacancy poster on the windows. It’s easy to compare. I can see the shadow of a person wavering on the ceiling. There’s someone in there. In a room with no curtains or furniture.

"…Over there."

The apartment diagonally above it. You could probably get a good view of the accident from 5 years ago from that room. I'm positive that it's that room. I have to tell Sakurako-san and Kobamatsu-san…! I look around and start running for the spot where we split up. Just a few metres before I get there, someone grabs my arm.

"Sa…"

"Hey, kid."

"…What?"

I thought it was Sakurako-san, but it's an unfamiliar old lady. She has a small build, a friendly smile, and laugh lines by her eyes.

"Oh… Sorry, I'll be quick."

She must want to ask for directions or something. I try to brush her hand away, but she doesn't let go.

"I need you to come with me."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help. There's a police box just down the road that way…"

"It has to be you."

"What?"

I'm in trouble. I can't just ignore an old lady, but this is an emergency.

"No, I'm… I'm actually in a hurry right now…"

I desperately look around for Sakurako-san or Kobamatsu-san . I notice Sakurako-san standing down the street.

"I'm sorry about this!" I gently pull her hand off of me so I don't hurt her, then start running away.

"Wait! You're Soutarou-kun, aren't you?"

"…Huh?"

You're Soutarou-kun, aren't you?

I stop and turn back to her. The old woman is smiling.

"I knew I wasn't mistaken. A man asked me to find you, he isn't too far away."

"W… What does he want?"

"I don't know, but he said you'd understand if I mentioned a butterfly… Umm, it was a snow something…"

“A snow Apollo?”

“Oh, yes! That was it!”

I have a good idea of who asked this old lady to talk to me.

“O-okay, I understand. Please wait for a minute. I’ll be right back!”

The ‘phantom’ that’s chasing the ‘white butterfly’ is nearby, but this invitation could be a trap, and finding Maki-sensei is my top priority right now. I know it wasn’t the old lady’s fault, but I feel annoyed as I run toward Sakurako-san, waving my arm.

“Sakurako-san!”

“Did you find him?”

“I don’t know, but there’s a weird room.” I briefly explain what I noticed.

“Well done,” Sakurako-san says. She pats my head once, then hurries toward the apartment building.

The building has its back facing the street. Since the entrance is on the other side and there’s private houses right next to each other, we have to go all the way around the street. I know I’m running as fast as I can, but Sakurako-san is falling way behind. She stumbles as she tries to keep up. Running seems difficult for her. Rather than lack of exercise, I think the issue is malnutrition.

“Are you okay?” I stop and reach out a hand to her.

“I hate running,” She says, panting heavily.

It’s almost the time of the accident. Just as I take out my phone to check the time with trembling hands, the ground shakes and our eardrums vibrate.

“An… An explosion?”

Black smoke rises from the apartment we were heading toward.

“Th… This is bad!”

“Wait!” Sakurako-san grabs me just as I try to move toward the apartment.

“Why?! That’s definitely Maki-san!”

“You’re right, but you can’t go.” She holds me back with a grim expression.

“Why?!”

“We don’t know if there’s only one explosive. Terrorists often set off a small explosion to attract people to the scene, then have successive larger explosions to maximize casualties. Additionally, there’s a high possibility of a fire starting. You should never approach the area when an explosion occurs.”

“You’re calling him a terrorist?!”

“That’s what you call someone who sets off bombs to try to get their message across.”

“But…”

My phone rings. It’s Kobamatsu-san .

“This is serious! There was an explosion just now!”

“We’ve also confirmed that. Kobamatsu-san , where are y—“

“Carpenter… It’s Koshiko-kun…” His voice is trembling on the other end of the phone.

“What about Koshiko-san?”

“The explosion… he was caught up in it.”

“…Huh?”

I feel the blood drain from my face. That can’t be right. It feels like misery is lurking around every corner.

Part 16

I rush to the scene of the accident, only to be met with a crowd.

“No way…”

“He ended up coming, after all… He said he spent all night thinking about it, and decided that he couldn’t betray his friends. Now I really wish he hadn’t…”

After we all split up to search, there was an explosion behind him. It came from that apartment I was curious about. He held his head to stop the ringing in his ears. He tried to make sure Koshiko-san was okay, but he was on the ground. In the blink of an eye, he was face down and dyed completely red. A shattered window has impaled him in multiple spots.

“I just called an ambulance. His heart is still beating, but he’s unconscious,” Kobamatsu-san says. He’s kneeling next to Koshiko-san. He keeps calling Koshiko-san’s name to try and make him stay awake, but it clearly didn’t work. He bites his lower lip.

“Did you find anything?”

“I didn’t, but he did.”

While Sakurako-san and Kobamatsu-san try to treat Koshiko-san, someone in the crowd gathered around us screams.

“He doesn’t seem like he has any particularly deep wounds, but… Since he got blown up, he could have damage to his internal organs.”

I had forgotten that Kobamatsu-san is well acquainted with the human body. He works with corpses every day, so he’s used to blood and gore. There’s no need for me to help.

“Our first priority should be to stop the bleeding, especially the cut on his head.” Kobamatsu-san takes a gauze handkerchief out of his jacket pocket. He presses it against the cut, but it instantly turns completely red.

“Does anyone here have a handkerchief?!” I call out, but almost everyone looks away.

A few elementary school aged girls lend me one, even though their faces are completely pale from fright. I’m thankful, but they’d really be better off not watching. I’m sure they’ll never forget this moment… I ask a random woman to keep the girls away. I turn back to Koshiko-san. The sight of his pale skin instantly brings me back to that day, all those years ago. Suddenly, a man pushes through the crowd next to me.

“Who are you?” The man asks all of us.

“Just some people passing by.”

“Then let me take over. I’m a doctor.”

Kobamatsu-san sighs, saying, “oh, that’s a relief.”

“Do you need anything?”

“A few towels to stop the bleeding, please.”

Sakurako-san takes her hands off Koshiko-san and lets the doctor in next to her.

“What should I do?”

“Go to the beauty parlour and borrow some towels!”

Kobamatsu-san and Sakurako-san run off. Now that Koshiko-san is being taken care of, I’m worried about that apartment, but

Sakurako-san wouldn't let me near it. Why did this have to happen….? Tears well up in my eyes.

I look around and notice that there are more people around than before. It's just the same as back then. No, this is even worse. Everyone has their phones out, taking pictures of Koshiko-san. How could they do that in a situation like this? Is it evil? Curiosity? Are they just that insensitive? "Wow, gross~!" "Woah, is he dead?" I can't take it anymore, so I run to a nearby daycare to get away from the crowd.

The staff noticed that something is happening, so they're standing outside looking confused. I explain the situation while borrowing some blankets and bath towels. One of the staff members comes with me.

The misfortune of others is a sweet nectar. The crowd of bystanders has grown exponentially in a short amount of time. I spread out the blankets in front of the doctor that's treating Koshiko-san. A displeased voice comes from behind me. I'm going to end up hating humanity. This bright red, gushing liquid isn't nectar. It seems that I'm not the only one who feels that way.

The daycare worker, as well as several other people, create a wall by holding up blankets. Once some police officers arrive, they push the crowd back. Several ambulances and police cars arrive. They block off the street, and evacuate everyone in the area because of the explosive.

The lights on the emergency vehicles are wavering, the same way they did five years ago. In an instant, the scene grows more intense. I'm worried about Koshiko-san. Just yesterday he was fine, but today he's in critical condition. I wish he hadn't come. Or rather, I wonder why he's here.

Even though I know I can't, I want to check out that apartment. Please let it be a gas leak. I don't want Maki-san to be there. I hope we were on the wrong track. Although it's normally a quiet area, there's so many people around asking what happened.

"A police car was going really fast, so I followed it."

"If you're free, how about we go to karaoke?" A group of men asks, approaching a group of laughing women.

People are talking about killing time or picking up girls, even in a situation like this. The reality of it crushes me. Anger with no clear target fills my body. Where's Sakurako-san? And Kobamatsu-san ? Everywhere I look is a giant mass of evil. I yearn for kindness.

As I start walking, I feel someone slip something into the pocket of my jacket. I'm so caught off guard that by the time I turn around, whoever it was had disappeared into the crowd. I hesitantly reach into my pocket, and pull out a folded piece of paper. Upon opening it, a white butterfly wing falls out.

"You got ahead of me this time, but I was faster in the end. Unfortunately, my butterfly wasn't here."

A chill runs up my spine. Thin red letters are scratched into the page. Does that mean Phantom met with Maki-sensei before the explosion? Did he influence Maki-sensei to commit suicide? Those thoughts fill my head, but the part that really gets me is about the butterfly not being here. Maki-sensei wasn't the evil butterfly that Phantom wanted.

Although I don't want to think about it, the only reason Sakurako-san and I weren't caught in the explosion is because that old lady stopped me. In other words, Phantom saved us. Was he also following this incident?

"Tatewaki-san!" Kobamatsu-san calls out to me.

When I look for where the voice came from, I see Sakurako-san's car parked on a side street coming off the main, closed road. Kobamatsu-san is in the back seat. I'm confused, but I hurriedly climb into the car. There's a woman sitting next to Kobamatsu-san . Short, bobbed hair, and a mole by her mouth… Oh, this must be Miki-san. Kobamatsu-san really is good at drawing.

"Why are you here?I Above all, I'm just glad she's safe.

"I thought I might meet the others here, but—"

I never expected this to happen.

"You were the only one," Sakurako-san says, looking at Miki-san in the rear view mirror.

"Please, tell me what's going on."

Sakurako-san narrows her eyes at her request.

"I'm begging you. Please tell me what happened."

Kobamatsu-san bows his head as well. Miki-san turns her face away. I can still see the tears running down her face.

“I just don’t understand,” she mutters, leaning against the window.

“Why did… Why did it turn out like this? This isn’t how it was supposed to go.” Her wet cheek rubbing against the glass makes a high pitched noise. Miki-san starts to sob, so Kobamatsu-san takes a deep breath.

“Can we head over to my house? To that room.”

Sakurako-san begins to drive, parting the crowd of onlookers. The sun completely sets, delving the city into night.

Part 17

Once we arrive at Kobamatsu-san’s parents’ house, I turn on the TV hoping they’ll say something about how the others are doing. The reports on the Hokkaido news stations are short, just saying that there was an explosion in Asahikawa and that they don’t know the details. I reluctantly search up the incident on social media, and immediately regret it. Unbearably cruel words and images spread across the screen.

“You shouldn’t look at that,” Kobamatsu-san says, covering my phone screen with his hand. He asks me to help prepare tea.

Sakurako-san grumpily sits on the couch across from Miki-san, who is worn out from crying. Things are fairly lively while I’m making the tea with Kobamatsu-san, but once everyone is seated, nobody knows what to say. Sakurako-san’s white shirt is stained with dried blood. I can’t stop thinking about the story I just heard about this place. Back then, I never thought someone would die because of all of this. I can’t stand that someone died when I was right there to do something.

“If we hadn’t gotten involved, none of this would have happened.”

We’re all becoming more and more aware of what we’ve done.

“If only he’d met up with us at the start… The end result wouldn’t change, but… Maybe he wouldn’t have gotten hurt…” Kobamatsu-san says.

Maybe we could have saved both of them, if only I'd gotten there a little faster…

"It's just as Kobamatsu said. Don't worry about it, boy. The fault lies with Koshiko and Maki. You should know that the apartments on both sides of his were vacant. What a foolish man. It's a good thing that we weren't nearby, otherwise we would have gotten hurt, too."

Miki-san bursts out laughing.

"…What exactly do you know?"

"I know more than you think. For example, do you know who killed Yamaguchi and Irie?"

"…" Sakurako-san glares at Miki-san.

"But I'm still missing some pieces. I need some more information to fill in the gaps. Explain it so someone who doesn't understand anything, like Kobamatsu, can understand," Sakurako-san says.

Kobamatsu-san smiles sadly.

"…He has the right to know everything."

"I just want to know what happened to Gouro-san- er, Chef."

"She… She wasn't a bad person. She was kind, but sad," Miki-san mutters. She pours some tea into her mug. It's not like the guest mugs that Sakurako-san and I have. Her mug has a picture of a cute, tiny bunny on it. She stares at the picture for a moment, then rests the mug on her lap without drinking any tea.

"After we left this house, we went to Maki-sensei's apartment. Unfortunately, both the front and back doors had security cameras. Sensei panicked because they weren't there before. We decided that we couldn't use his apartment."

They had to find a place where nobody would notice them, and no sound would escape. They wandered Asahikawa all night looking for a good spot. Then, Miki-san remembered the abandoned house.

"Remember when those two high schoolers committed suicide? I tried searching online, and I found the area where the old shack is. It'll only be a temporary hiding place until we can find a new spot to confine them."

They all headed over there, each carrying the feeling that this would be their last hiding place. The roof had collapsed in a few

spots, but the house was in relatively good condition. That's the impression I got from the two times I visited it, too. There was also a bed on the second floor, though it was pretty dusty. There was some furniture left, and the second floor was relatively clean, so they decided it would be a good place to stay if they tidied up a bit.

The captives had been confined and anaemic for so long that they weren't strong enough to stand up on their own. They managed to drag the two of them up the stairs, and tied them to the bed. They kept them confined to the hallway and stairwell area. Luckily, there was a well with a hand pump outside. They were hesitant to actually drink the water, especially without electricity.

It wasn't exactly comfortable for the three of them holding the captives. They were fine during the day, but at night they only had the dim glow of a flashlight to see by. Miki-san grew to be afraid of the dark because she knew that people had died there.

"It was hard for just the three of us to keep watch on them, too. There were lots of days where nobody could watch them, so we just had to lock them up and hope for the best. There were a lot of times where I had to watch them alone, too. I had to make time every few days to go home so I could shower and sleep… It was really hard."

Yamaguchi and Irie also weren't being kept in sanitary conditions. They gave them food, but didn't do anything else to take care of them. Everyone was so exhausted that they didn't even feel like having "execution time" anymore.

"Even though they were being abused so badly, Yamaguchi and Irie still didn't give up. They would grin and glare at us whenever they saw us. It was frustrating. We lost to that man, from beginning to end."

How can someone be so mentally tough in that situation? Even if they had been released at that point, they would definitely continue to commit crimes, and report how they were confined.

"I didn't know what to do anymore, I just wanted it to be over. I was envious of Koshiko-san and Undertaker. I wanted nothing more than to go back to my regular life."

All three of them felt hopeless and cornered. Kobamatsu-san frowns while he listens to the story.

“Despite everything, I still had to go to work and pretend like everything was normal. I felt like I was going insane. Then, one day, I saw Koshiko-san by the park. I knew he’d help if I asked.”

“Huh? You saw him?” I blurt out. Miki-san nods.

“So he met up with you guys again, after all.”

“Yeah… but he tried to stop me. He said we should turn ourselves in, and that we should atone for our crimes together… Honestly, I was so tired of everything. But when we went back to the shack, Chef was there, crying on a dusty stool on the first floor.”

They knew something bad had happened, so they couldn’t blame her. Gouro-san had been bearing the heaviest burden out of the three of them.

“She just kept crying and wouldn’t answer my questions, so I hurried to the second floor. When I checked on the captives, Irie was unconscious. I’m not a doctor, but I could tell it was a serious situation. My heart was pounding.”

However, without electricity, they couldn’t use video to monitor Yamaguchi and Irie. There was no record of what happened. They quickly called Doctor, but there was nothing he could do. Their only options were to go to the hospital, or let her die there.

“I asked Yamaguchi what happened. He said that Irie made Gouro-san angry.”

“Baby killer” and “you’re the reason I lost my child” are some of the abusive words Irie shouted at Gouro-san. Thus, Gouro-san, known then as Chef, struck Irie’s face,

“Yamaguchi was laughing when he told me. A disgusting, cruel laugh. Beneath the light of the lantern, I thought to myself that if true evil exists, that’s what it looks like. ‘You guys are all the same. Scum who can’t do anything by themselves,’ Yamaguchi said to me.”

Though their voices had grown frail, Yamaguchi and Irie’s words had struck each group member’s heart.

“Before I knew it, Koshiko-san was sitting on top of Yamaguchi and punching him repeatedly. By the time we stopped him, Yamaguchi was barely breathing. I thought that would be the end.”

So the fracture in his hand really was from hitting another person. Kobamatsu-san and I can’t hide our shock. Sakurako-san

continues listening to Miki-san with an unchanging expression.

“Still, Doctor said he’d do everything he could to prevent them from dying. Chef and Carpenter were really worked up, so they were sent home. We decided to take another look at the situation in the morning and decide what to do from there, but… Doctor said he would take all the blame… So…” Miki-san takes a deep breath. She tries to confess. But she hesitates.

“So you lit the fire… Right?” Sakurako-san says it for her.

Miki-san curls her body up, like she’s trying to protect herself.

“…Why?”

“Maki and Koshiko only let you escape.”

Kobamatsu-san looks at Miki-san and Sakurako-san, his lips quivering. I was sure Gouro-san had lit it. Perhaps Kobamatsu-san did, too.

“Those men were fools. They tried to protect this woman, who is the most guilty out of them all, because they felt guilty for making her do something they wanted, but were too scared to.”

Without denying Sakurako-san’s words, Miki-san takes a sip of her tea, and another deep breath. “It was getting colder at night, so we prepared an oil stove for heating. There was a plastic container of oil in the hallway. I doused Yamaguchi’s stool in kerosene without hesitation.”

“…Miki-san…”

“But then I realised there was no fire. No cigarettes, or anything like that to get the fire going. I knocked over a scented candle on the floor. Then I lit it while it was on its side. I thought it was fate, like someone had set everything up for me.”

“No… You’re lying,” I shakily force out.

I was the one who put the lighter in that bedroom. I took it from Kouhei-san when he tried to commit suicide. Did Mika-san bring the aromatic candle? Why was it on the second floor? Wouldn’t they have used it on the first floor? My stomach twists with confusion, dread, and guilt. It’s possible that they belonged to someone else who visited since then. I hope so.

“Then… You really did it?” Kobamatsu-san asks Miki-san without looking at her.

“Yes. I didn’t hesitate at all when I lit the candle. The fire spread frustratingly slowly, but soon, the room was filled with the sweet scent of roses. Then, the pillar of fire grew. No matter how important the law is… some things are just necessary. I had to protect my friends, the people I love. That, in itself… I don’t regret.”

Afterwards, she figured there was no way she could keep living. The three men had to restrain her to keep her from pouring kerosene on herself. They all agreed that they wanted to protect Miki-san. She decided to move elsewhere until things calmed down, but she told the others not to worry about her. Chef also said she was going to leave Asahikawa for a while. As long as everyone stays quiet, nobody will find out.

“When I saw on the news that the police declared Yamaguchi and Irie’s death as a suicide, I thought I was finally free, but… Every time I remember what happened, I feel terrified of what I did. I crossed a line that I never should have even gone near. Even though everyone else protected me, I felt like she couldn’t keep living,” Miki-san mutters despondently. She stares at her reflection in her cup of tea. “Doctor suggested that I go on a trip. He said I was just tired, and if I relaxed for a while, I’d feel better. He told me he was always available for consultations over the phone, and that everyone else was already back to life as usual.”

“But Chef committed suicide.”

“What?” Miki-san freezes in place. “You’re lying! Doctor said he visited her after helping me move, and she was taking time off work to relax and focus on reading. He suggested that she go on a trip, like he told me…”

“I think… She hanged herself as soon as he left.”

Maybe we shouldn’t have told her about this. Miki-san looked detached this whole time, but now her face is full of pain and sadness.

“No! Why would she do that?! There was no reason! I killed Yamaguchi so we could all go back to normal!”

“She was the only one who knew the reason. Nearly killing Irie, seeing you kill Yamaguchi… She was probably wracked with guilt, and didn’t see a way out,” Sakurako-san says coldly.

She suddenly points at the TV that had been left on. There's a picture of a familiar street on the screen. They're saying that there was an explosion in an apartment, and the man inside was killed. Another man who was caught in the blast is unconscious and in critical condition. Nobody says anything.

"…I thought you were lying," Miki-san eventually mumbles.

"I… Really hated Yamaguchi. I could never forgive him for what he did. I thought we did the right thing, so…. How could this happen?"

Sakurako-san lets out a short sigh. "If human emotions were always right, we wouldn't need laws."

"Then… What should we have done?" Miki-san's eyes are red, and there's tears streaming down her face. In the end, nobody knows how to answer her question.

Final part

Miki-san and Kobamatsu-san both decided to turn themselves in. They could have kept quiet and returned to their regular lives, but they thought all the people who died would want them to turn themselves in. Miki-san said it was her way of atoning for what she did. They couldn't shake the guilt of killing two people without suffering for it.

The only thing they kept quiet about was Koshiko-san. He didn't want his parents to suffer even more, after losing their son. Koshiko-san breathed his last 3 days after the explosion.

While Sakurako-san was driving Miki-san and Kobamatsu-san to the police station, Miki-san said there was somewhere she wanted to go first. The riverside.

"This is where the 5 of us met… I never thought Yamaguchi would really show up, but as they say, truth is stranger than fiction," Miki-san says while she watches the lights pass by the pitch black river. "But right now, I feel a lot lonelier than I did back then." She hugs herself like she's cold.

"It was summer back then. The bugs and frogs should have been noisy, but… It was quiet that night," Kobamatsu-san says with a smile.

It's almost fall now. I can smell the scent of winter in the wind.

“I know I shouldn’t be saying this, but when the five of us were living together… I had a lot of fun, but-“ Miki-san kicks a rock and watches it roll away. Kobamatsu-san nods with a sad look in his eyes.

Would they all have gotten along if they’d met under different circumstances? No, probably not. I’m sure that if it weren’t for Yamaguchi, their paths would never have crossed.

“Even after everything that’s happened, I’m glad we met,” Miki-san says. She falls to her knees and sobs while pressing her forehead to the asphalt.

Atsurou Maki’s Testament

Five years ago, Kazuo Yamaguchi faced a light sentence for the crime of killing a woman and her baby. I wholeheartedly condemn this country for turning a blind eye to the fact that he failed to give back to society by working, for providing him with free handouts, and giving him a far too short sentence.

So before there were more victims, a group that believes in my justice abducted and confined Kazuo Yamaguchi, as well as his accomplice, Yua Irie.

They were executed by fire.

Everything was done by my arbitrary judgement.

It is my heartfelt wish that this incident will drive the country toward a more just system of law. A judicial system that gives preferential treatment to the perpetrators is not protecting the citizens or bereaved families as it should.

Who is truly being punished?

May the law abiding, harmless citizens live in peace and happiness.

And above all, may the law be practised with love.

I dedicate my death to the protest against the country.

Maki-san sent a statement to some newspapers and TV stations before his death. After the arrest of Miki-san and Kobamatsu-san, the story of the four of them, excluding Koshiko-san, was made public. Society had various opinions on it.

Some sympathised with them, saying “I’d do the same thing in that situation.” Some criticised them, wondering “Couldn’t they have consulted somebody about it?”

Unfortunately, it did not lead to the legal reform they desired. However, the movement to reconsider the citizen judge system spread across the country. At my high school we had classes where we exchanged opinions and learned about what would happen if we were actually at a trial. The media reported about how many people who were selected to be citizen judges in the past are still traumatised by what they were shown. There’s been discussion about how graphic photos can be processed to reduce the psychological impact on the people who have to view them.

The key change that came from all of this was the emotional care for jurors. Right now, there’s a mental health support counter for jurors, but it can only be used a limited amount of times, and many people are unaware of it, so it’s rarely used. There’s a strong movement to improve the current system. Some experts are saying that if Maki-san and Miki-san (and by extension, Koshiko-san) had access to better mental health care, this whole incident could have been avoided.

It’s hard for me to believe the impact that Maki-sensei’s death had on the whole country. Deep in my heart, I know that what he did was wrong, even if it caused change.

Hanabusa said before “Justice only exists in one’s beliefs.” In that case, is it good or bad when someone’s beliefs cause them to commit a crime? Where is the line drawn between Hanabusa and I. Now that I’ve seen the grey between the black and white justice system, I’m wondering what shade I believe in.

Epilogue

It’s been one week since Kobamatsu-san and Miki-san turned themselves in. When I think about the five of them, I start asking myself more questions. I can hardly sleep at night lately. Justice is a belief. What do I believe in? Sakurako-san seems to think that all five

of them were foolish. Near the end of our conversation with them, she looked at them with disdain.

It's the first time I've seen her in the week since the incident. She's having tea with lots of homemade caramel in it, and caramel ice cream. Sakurako-san laughs at my worries, saying they're silly.

"But I still think the world is made of things that are either right, or not right."

"Something that vague is up to individual interpretation. Take this caramel ice cream, for example. I might think it's sweet, but someone else might think it's bitter."

The ice cream is a mixture of bittersweet and regular sweet.

"…I know it's ambiguous. I don't even know what I think anymore. I'm sure that goes double for you, which is why I think you need rules."

"I do?"

"Yeah, so you don't become like Hanabusa."

Whether they're good or bad, never take someone's life. It's not always about numbers, but if you're forced to make a choice, minimise the amount of lives lost. She keeps eating her ice cream instead of paying attention.

"You're different from Hanabusa. You're purer than Hanabusa, so you don't have your own idea of right and wrong, you need a set of steadfast principles so that you don't lose your way, even if you end up alone one day. You're not 'black' or 'grey.' You're 'white.'"

In the not too distant future, gran and professor Shitara will be gone. Shouko-san and Aoba-san will eventually grow old. Even Ariwara-san is older than her, and he does a dangerous job where anything could happen.

Then there's me. I can't even begin to imagine where I'll be in 10 years. I may not even be in Asahikawa anymore. I used to have vague thoughts about leaving this city, but now I want to stay here as long as I can. No matter what I choose to do, I won't always be able to stay with her like I do now. The reason I can stay with Sakurako-san right now is because… I'm still a child.

"Humans don't live forever, and… I definitely don't want you to ever commit a crime, even if you're on your own… 'big sister.'"

Her silver spoon clatters against her glass. Perhaps that's the sound her heart is making, as well.

"…You're mean," Sakurako-san says with a forced smile. "The dead don't grieve. Kobamatsu had a point when he said that, but it's still all just for self-satisfaction. Regardless of what I do, Soutarou won't be upset… But you're alive, and if I did something, it would make you worry," Sakurako-san says, then eats two more bites of ice cream silently. Soon, she lets out a deep sigh. "Ume is hospitalised in Sapporo."

"What?"

"I took her to some hot springs for a while, but she didn't get better. She complained that she didn't need it, but they ordered a full examination. Fortunately it's nothing too serious, but she needs surgery."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?!" I accidentally raise my voice after hearing the sudden news. Everyone in the shop is looking at me, so I embarrassedly curl up in my seat.

"Ume didn't want me to. She's reluctant to stay at the hospital in the first place. She wants to work for the Kujou family until her dying breath. Besides, she said she didn't want you to worry."

Gran was especially worried about telling me because of what happened with my grandma as a kid. But… I was still so worried that I ended up finding someone's corpse while I looked for them…

"How do you think I felt waiting for you all that time?," In my effort to speak quieter, I accidentally sound angry. Sakurako-san shrugs.

"That's why I said it was a trip. You'd notice if I tried to lie to you, right? You'd be upset if you saw through it."

"I was upset anyway! Besides… I wanted to be able to talk with you properly."

"…"

Sakurako-san narrows her eyes at me as she refills my cup with tea. Staring at the deep, red ripples in the cup, we're both at a loss for words.

"I've been thinking… about the possibility of losing Ume," Sakurako-san murmurs, her voice hoarse. "Even if she's fine right

now, next time something happens, I could really lose her… When that happens, I don't know what I'm going to do." Her voice sounds strained.

My mouth feels dry.

"I don't know how to live on my own, but I can learn how. I realised… That I'm going to lose something else, too. I thought it would be nice to have the hotel room all to myself, but… It was empty. It was the first time I realised that I was lonely."

Yeah, I guess it would be. The silent, solitary place she was calling from wasn't a phone booth. My mom said she sounded calm, but she was really lonely.

"You should have at least told Shouko-san and I about it."

I don't mean to scold her, but I want her to rely on me at times like this. I'm sure Shouko-san feels the same way. Sakurako-san gives me an ambiguous smile and shakes her head. Her heart is different from mine. The way we deal with sadness and pain must be different, too.

I understand now why Shouko-san wasn't interested in looking for her. But still, she's all alone right now. I can't blame her anymore. She's having a hard time, too. I give up on convincing her, and sip my tea instead. It's bitter, but it makes my whole body feel warm.

"…Then is she okay now?"

"Yes, she is. She'll still be in the hospital for a few more days, so if you have time, you can come visit her. Ume might be upset… But I think you have the right to visit her. Oh, and you don't need to bring pudding this time."

"Got it. I'll buy asahimame instead."

Gran doesn't need pudding yet. She's going to be fine. She might someday, but not yet.

"Let me hear those rules of yours again."

"Hm?"

"Not that I plan on becoming like Hanabusa in the first place. Not for Soutarou or gran's sake, but for yours." She has an awkward smile on her face. "And I won't be like Doctor or the others, either. You said that I need steadfast principles that won't be shaken by good or evil, right?"

“Sakurako-san…”

She puts down her spoon and gestures for me to continue.

“But… Is it okay?”

“Well, sometimes you don’t know if you like something at first, but then it grows on you,” Sakurako-san says with a mischievous wink.